

FANTASTIC FOUR

*"If you enjoy wonderment,
science, or simply
adventure, do not pass
up Fantastic Four."*

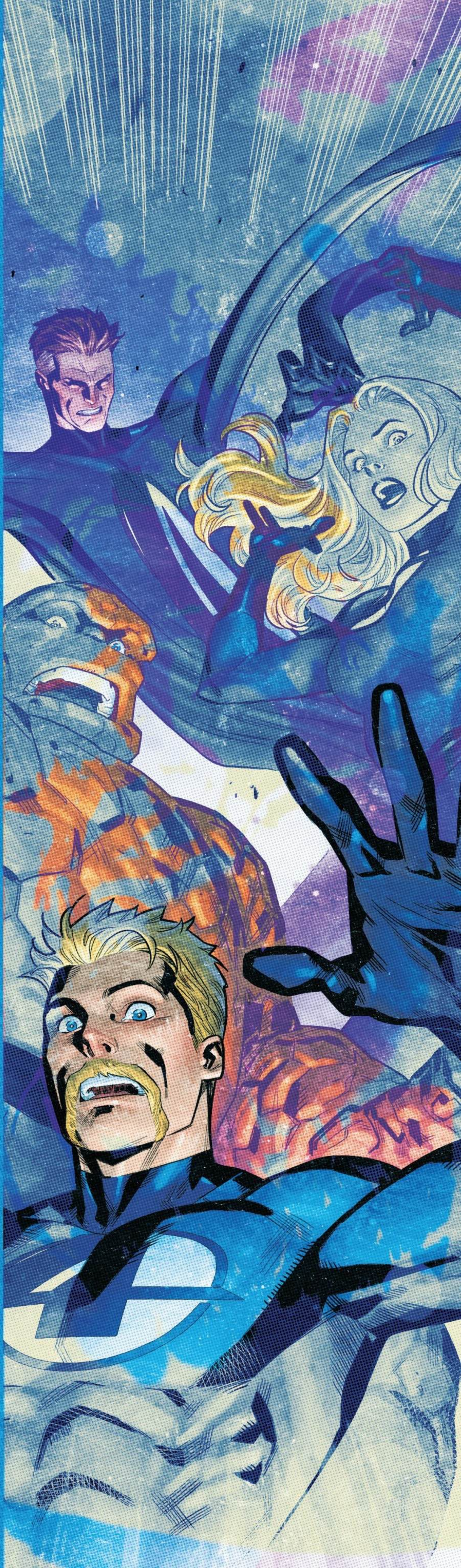
— APT

NORTH
GÓMEZ
CUMMINGS
ABURTOV

**ALIENS, GHOSTS AND
ALTERNATE EARTHS**

MARVEL

CURIOUS FALLS



FANTASTIC FOUR

ALIENS, GHOSTS AND ALTERNATE EARTHS

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I'm *Johnny Storm*--
the *Human Torch*--
and in this story, I get
choked by an alien.

Try to act
surprised.

So, a few weeks
back, *Doc Doom*
announced he was now
Earth's *Sorcerer
Supreme*. And the
first thing he does?

Disappear inside
Latveria's magically
protected borders.

Since then, *some* people
have remained focused on
Doom. Reed's all--

We must
deduce what he's
planning, so we can
determine how his
plans might best be
prevented.

But honestly, most
everyone else has
moved on. Because of
course they have!

A world
without Doom
is a blessing!

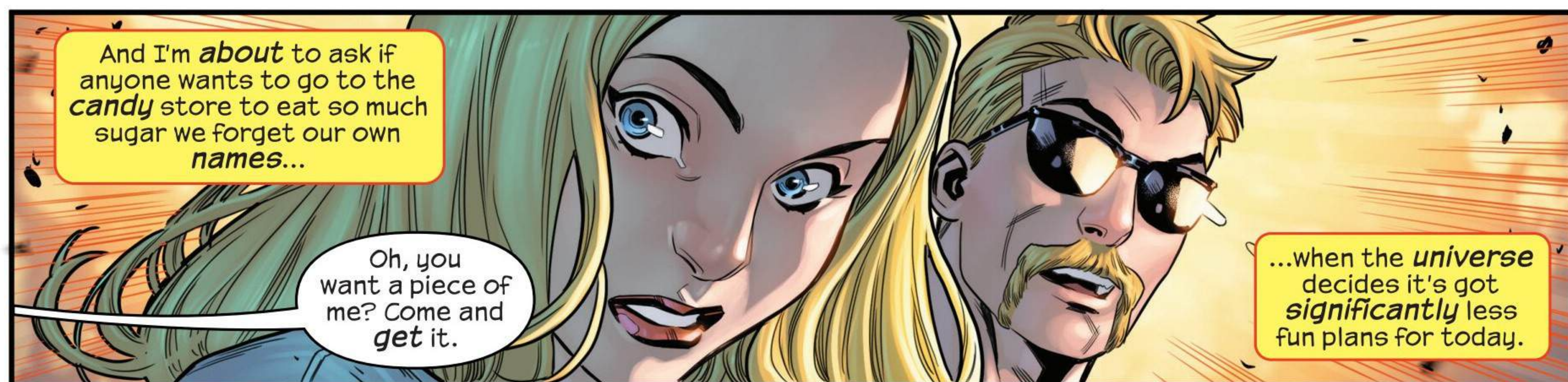
And if he *does* return,
so what? The simple
fact of the matter is--

If Doom
tries anything,
we'll *defeat*
him.

We've
done it before
how many
times??

Bad!





Oh! I forgot to say: Vampires are real, *and* in an unrelated adventure, they can walk around in the sun now.

It's caused--
tensions.

Come on!
Do it! Get up, *vampire*,
and try to take a *bite*.
See how well it *goes*
for you.

You better
keep walking,
daywalker.

Or you'll
what? You'll
what?!

Hey!

Stay out
of this.

What, is he
your buddy? You
looking to get
bit too?

Nah,
I'm good for
bites.

FWOOOOO!!

Hey, quick
question--are
you guys good
for *flames*,
or...?

SMACK!

Grahhh!

Johnny!



S-something hard. Hit me like a ton of bricks.

I don't--
I don't--



Arrggh!



That's *it*.
Human or vampire,
you do *not* get to
attack my
brother...

...and you
definitely do
not get to attack
my *niece* and
nephew.

Whoa!



We didn't
have anything
to *do* with this,
lady!

Yeah, find
someone else to
squeeze into a
force-field!

What, they
just *happened*
to get hit when we
intervened? It's a big
coincidence, and you're
completely
innocent?



Lady.

Look
behind
you.

I'm stunned, but I know two things. The first is that *something's* horribly wrong.

And the *second* is that the Fantastic Four are just the ones to *fix* it.



SMAKK!

SMAKK!

SMAKK!

SMAKK!
SMAKK!

SMAKK!

Johnny!
The kids!

I'm on it!
I'm, uh,
I'm almost
on it!

SMAKK!

SMAKK!

SMAKK!

SMAKK!



I'm unharmed.
I will survive.

We are
tough. What's
happening,
Auntie Sue?

I don't
know! I'm making a
force-field above
New York to **stop**
whatever's
hitting us...



...and
it's not
working.

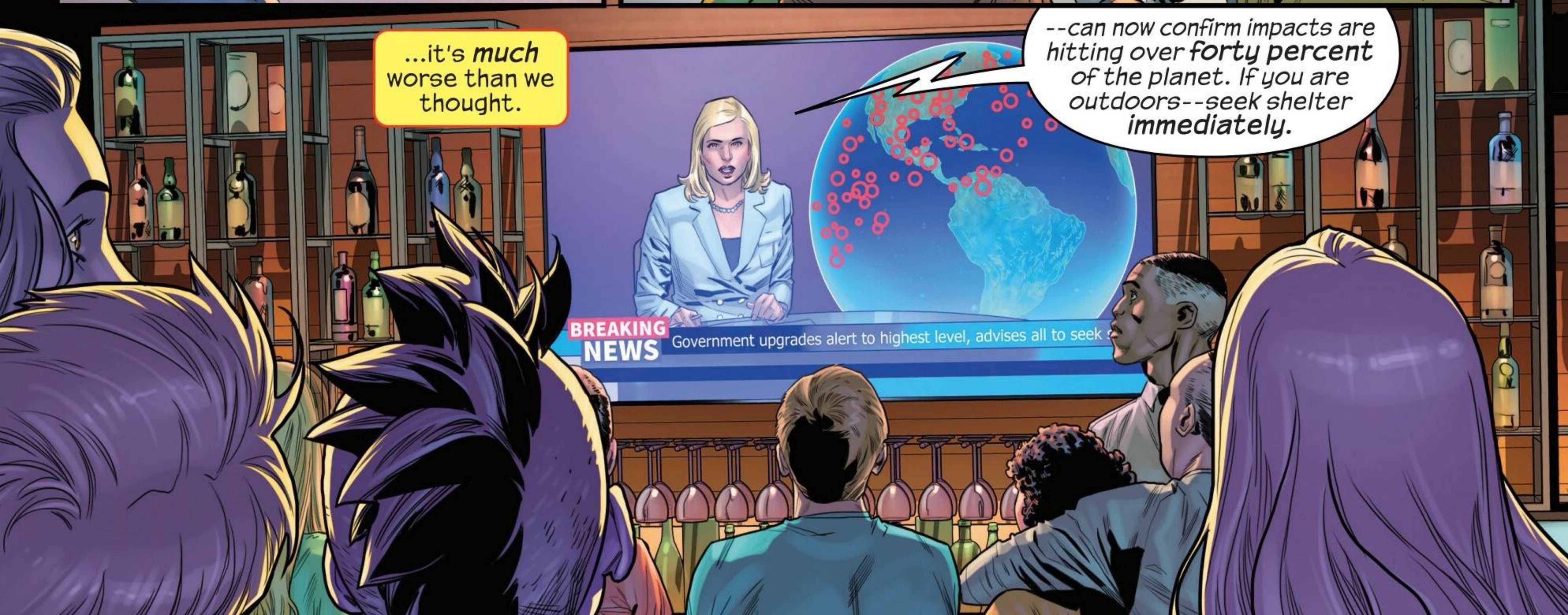


You four--
get out of here.
Seek shelter.

Yeah, that,
uh, that won't be
a problem.



We do the same.
And it's there
that we find out...



...it's **much**
worse than we
thought.

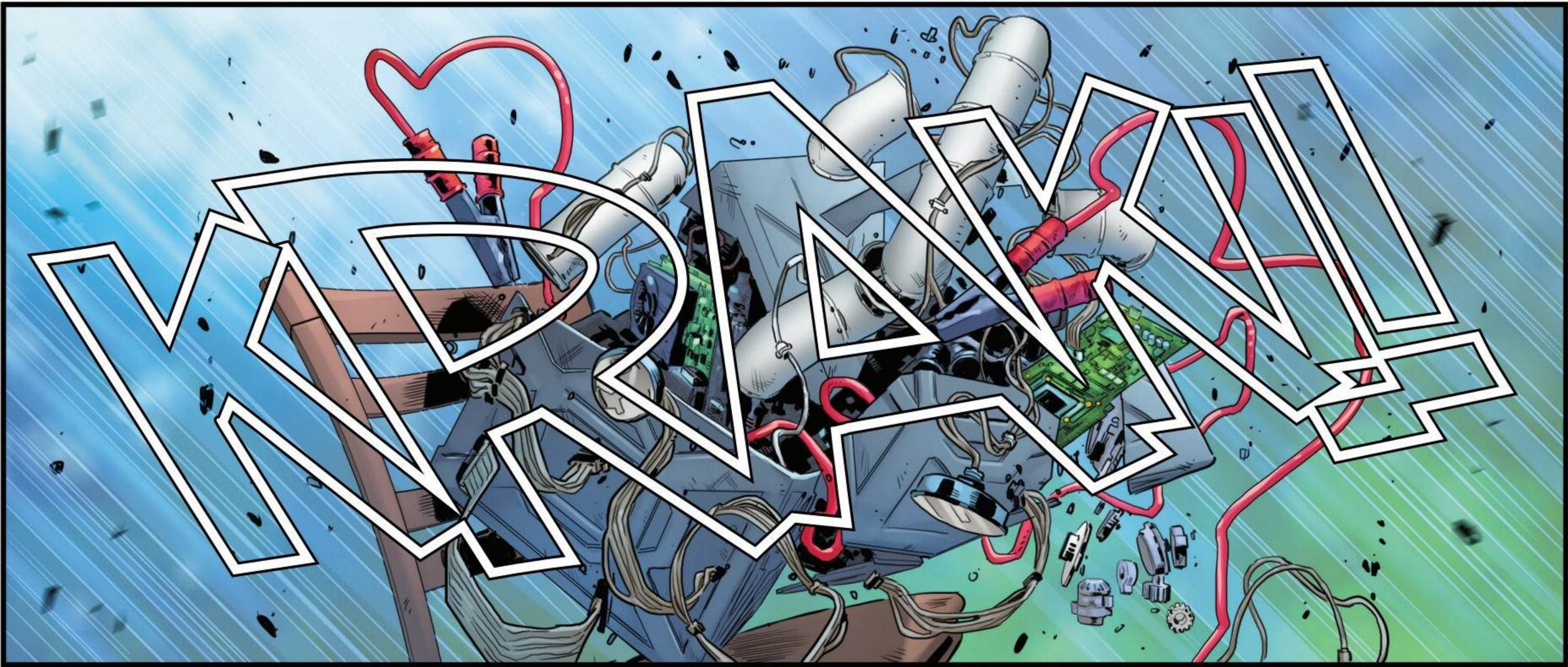
--can now confirm impacts are
hitting over **forty percent**
of the planet. If you are
outdoors--seek shelter
immediately.

BREAKING NEWS Government upgrades alert to highest level, advises all to seek

Meanwhile, in Arizona, Ben and Reed had no idea anything was wrong...

And whatcha got *this* time, Big Brain?

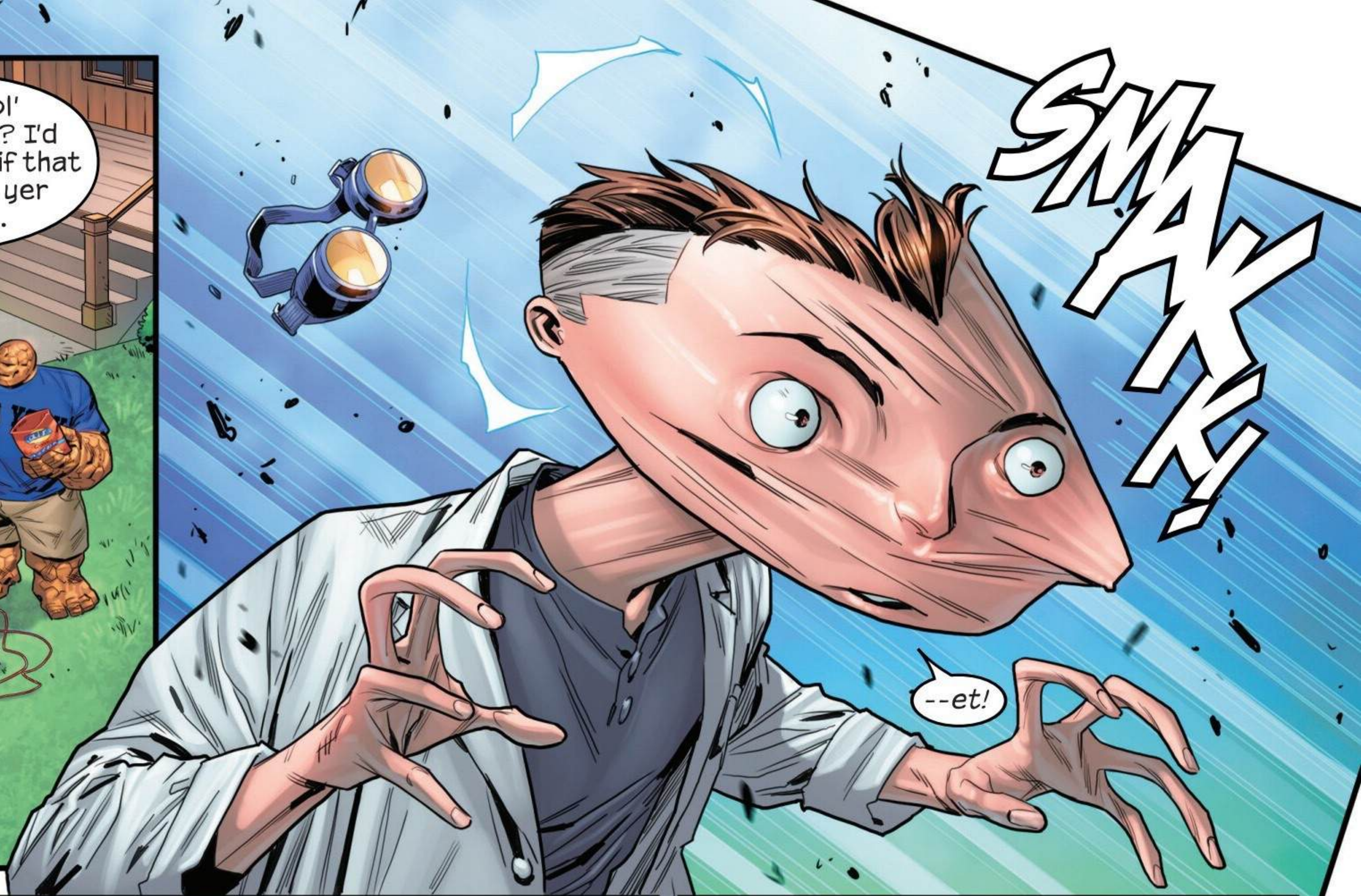
Well, Ben, it's either an invention that will let us *scientifically* detect the presence of Sorcerer Supreme magic...





...Back to the ol' drawin' board, huh? I'd feel bad, Stretcho, if that weren't *already* yer favorite place.

Odd. I hadn't even turned it *on* y--



--et!



Reed?!

Reed!



...That shouldn't be possible.

Uh--what shouldn't, exactly?

I'm not *certain* yet, but, Ben...the only explanation I can see is-- *fantastic*.



"Fantastic," huh? Ya don't need ta tell me twice. What are we *waitin'* for?

I'll get Susie and Flamebrain on the horn...



"...and tell 'em ta meet us at th' *Baxter Buildin'*."

Another threat from space, huh?

That's me speaking there.

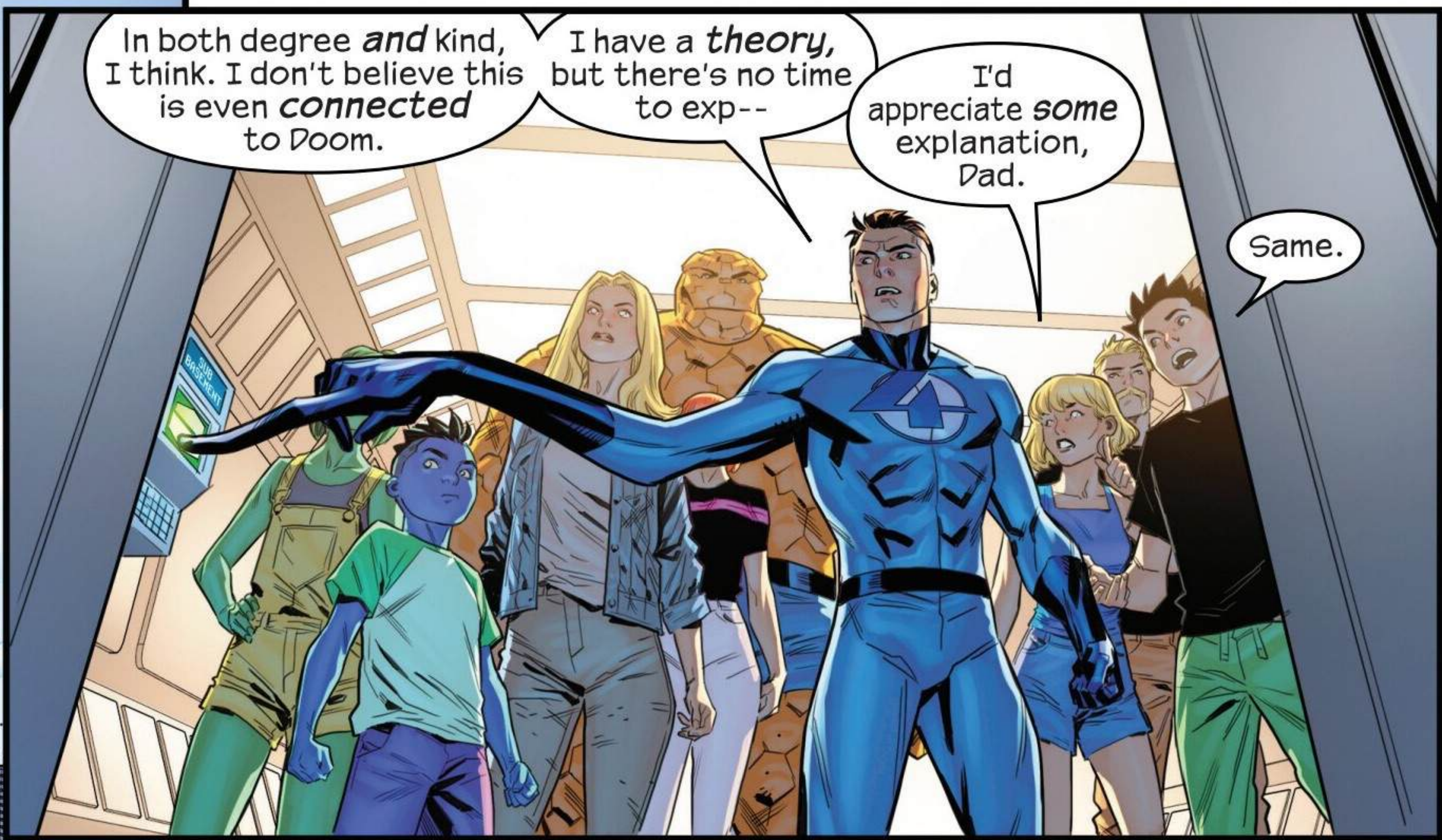
Superficially, yes.

And that's Sue.



But whatever this is, it's not like those invisible asteroids we faced a few months back.

Those, I could stop. These are different.



In both degree *and* kind, I think. I don't believe this is even *connected* to Doom.

I have a *theory*, but there's no time to exp--

I'd appreciate *some* explanation, Dad.

Same.



Okay, fair. There's *little* time to explain, so I suggest I do so while *simultaneously* preparing our next steps.

An' those are?

To *confirm*, we need *data*. Johnny, you've kept all our old vehicles in working order, yes?



Oh, *far* better than just working order--these puppies are purring like, um...

...like, uh, kittens, I guess?

Terrific. To know what we're up against, we're going to need to *shrink* further than we *ever* have before...

...which means we're going to need the *Reducta-Craft*.





And this is where Reed launches into one of his patented explain-o-matic science lectures.

And it's *fine*, but I could totally do better.

So I will!
Right now!



So. Back in 1991, turns out Earth got hit with a particle that was going *way* faster than it should've been--

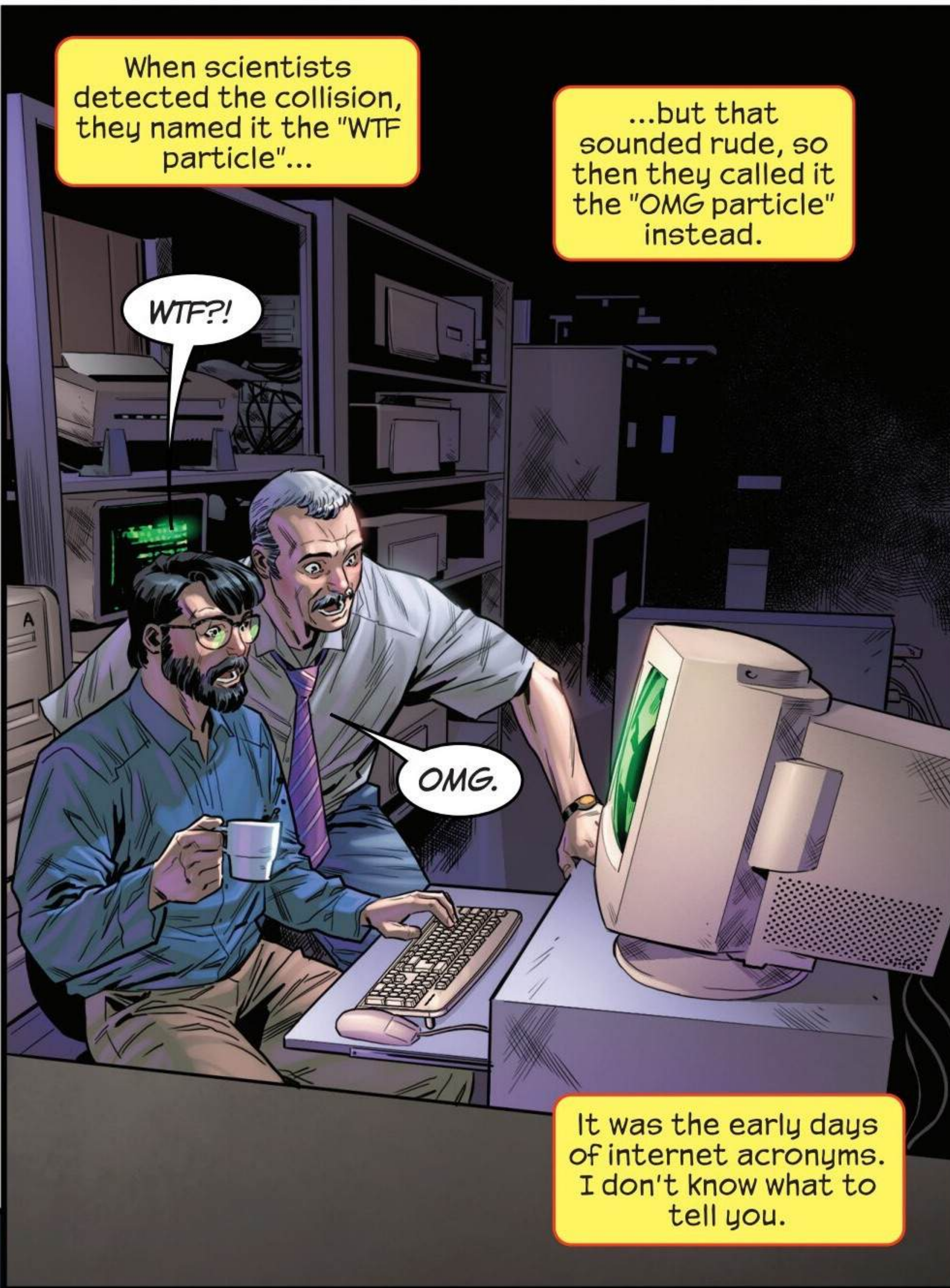
Woo!
No regrets!

--like
99.99999999951%
of *light-speed*
fast.



Some regrets!!

SMACK!



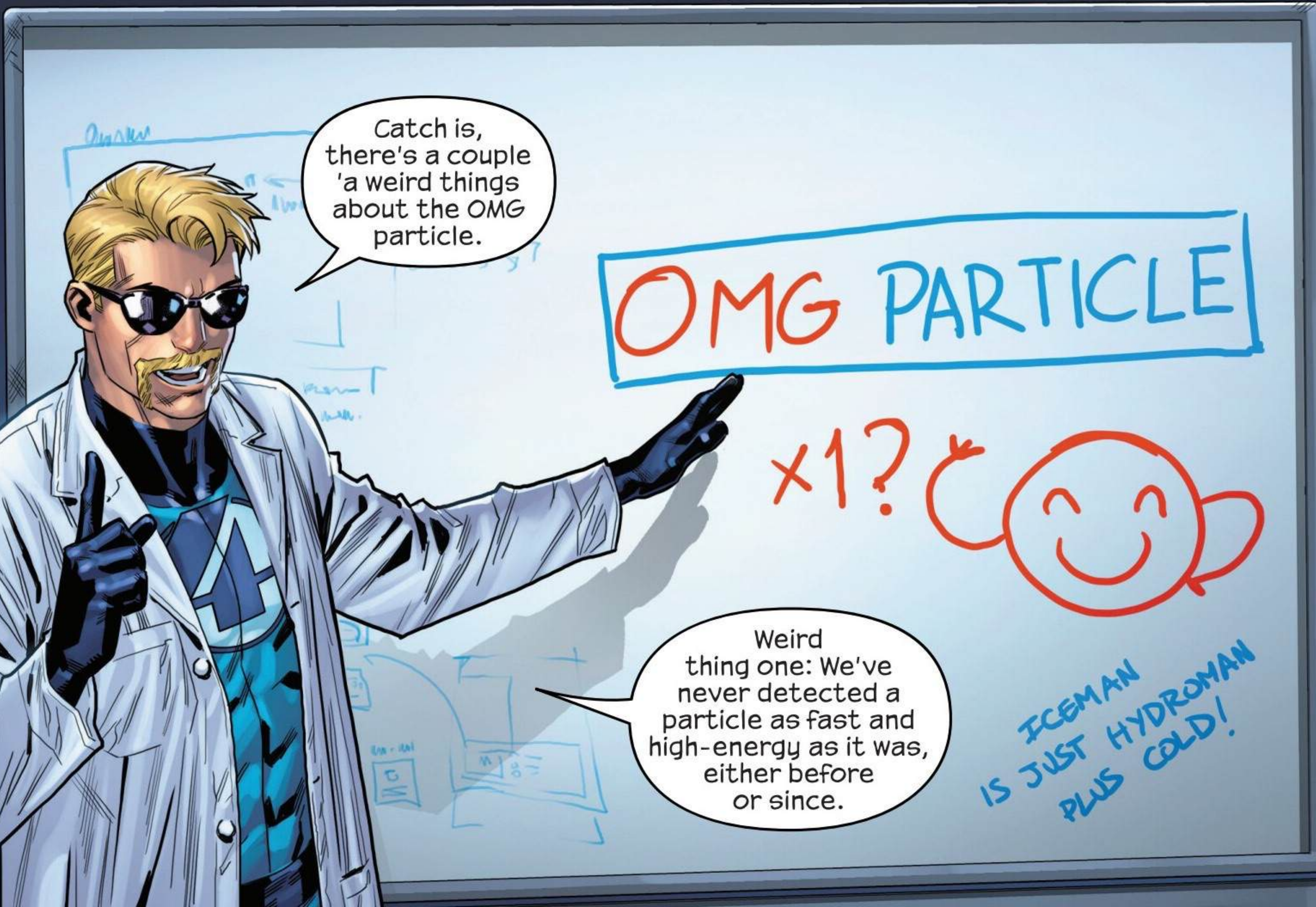
When scientists detected the collision, they named it the "WTF particle"...

...but that sounded rude, so then they called it the "OMG particle" instead.

WTF?!

OMG.

It was the early days of internet acronyms. I don't know what to tell you.



Catch is, there's a couple 'a weird things about the OMG particle.

OMG PARTICLE

x1?



Weird thing one: We've never detected a particle as fast and high-energy as it was, either before or since.

ICEMAN
IS JUST HYDROMAN
PLUS COLD!



Weird thing two: Scientists called it a "cosmic ray," but getting hit by it *doesn't* give you super-powers??

Reed didn't think that was weird, but c'mon. That's what cosmic rays *do*.



And weird thing three is we're not actually sure how an OMG particle is made or where they come from.

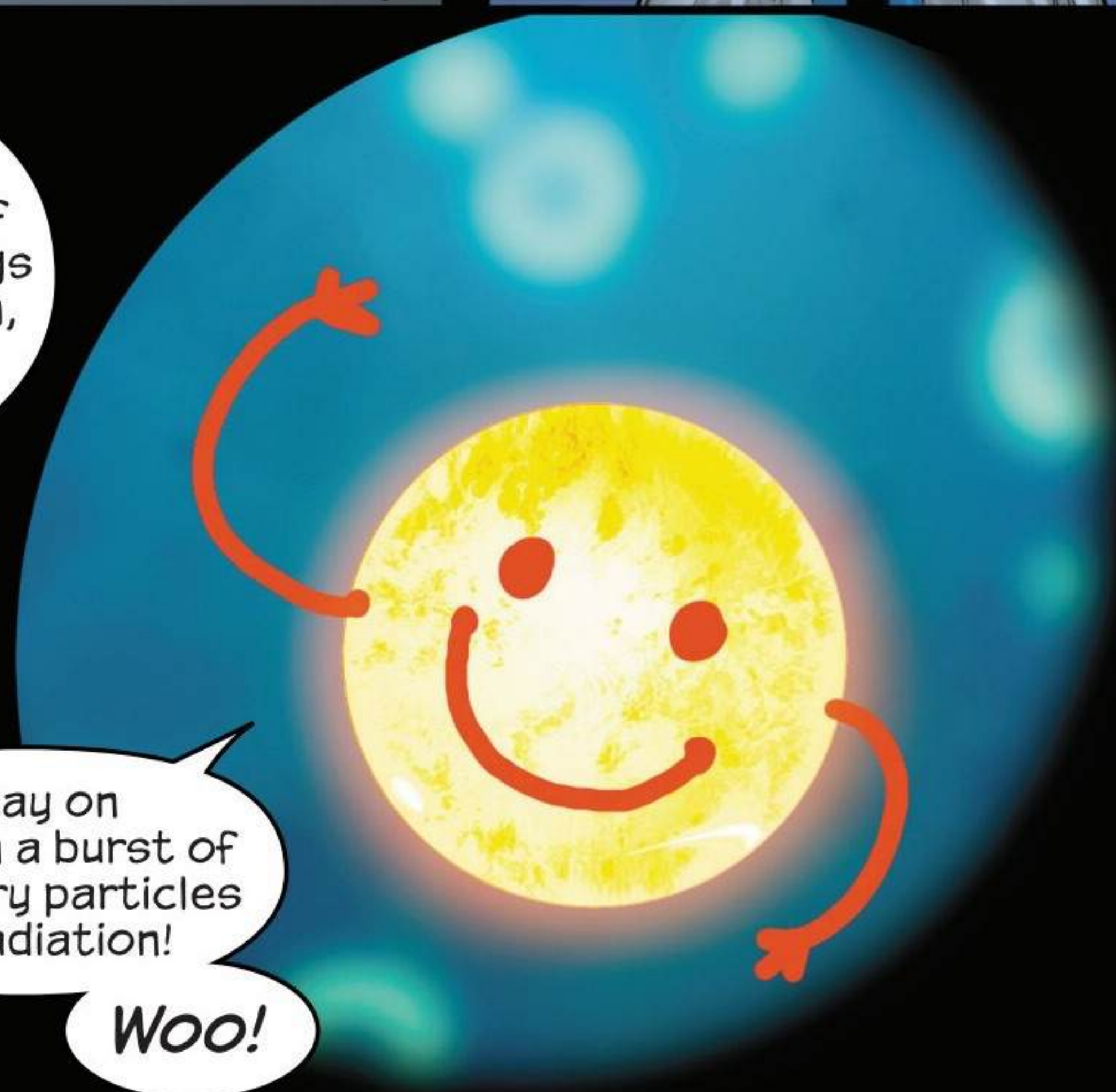
Yep! Just one of those fun *science mysteries* to fill you with either awe or incredible dread as you contemplate the unknowable void of the universe!



Anyway, Reed believes hundreds, possibly *thousands*, of these hitherto-rare things are now arriving at Earth, and rather than doing what they'd normally do--

Decay on impact in a burst of secondary particles and radiation!

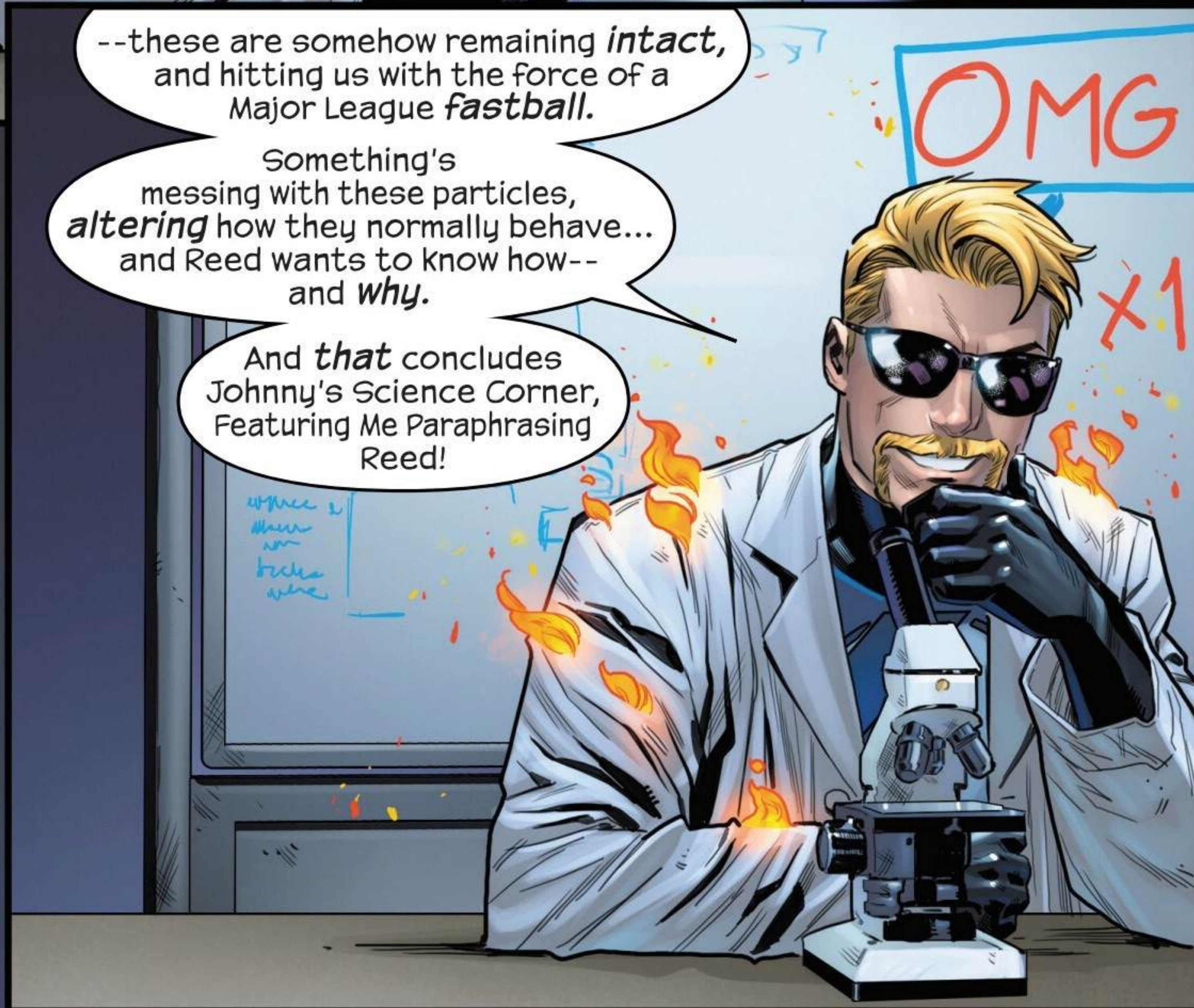
Woo!



--these are somehow remaining *intact*, and hitting us with the force of a Major League *fastball*.

Something's messing with these particles, *altering* how they normally behave... and Reed wants to know how-- and *why*.

And *that* concludes Johnny's Science Corner, Featuring Me Paraphrasing Reed!



...Ladies.



Anyway, Reed was all "it's too dangerous, so I'm going alone," and we were all "lol if it's that dangerous then **no way** are you going alone"--

--then he was all "there's no time to argue," and we were all "good, so stop arguing, then"--

--and that juuust about catches you up.



Leesh, Nicki, Jo, Val, Franklin: We'll need ya here ta monitor the Reducta-Craft and ta bring us **back** if--eh, call it "when"--somethin' goes **wrong**.

You got it. Tactile interface same as last time?

It is.

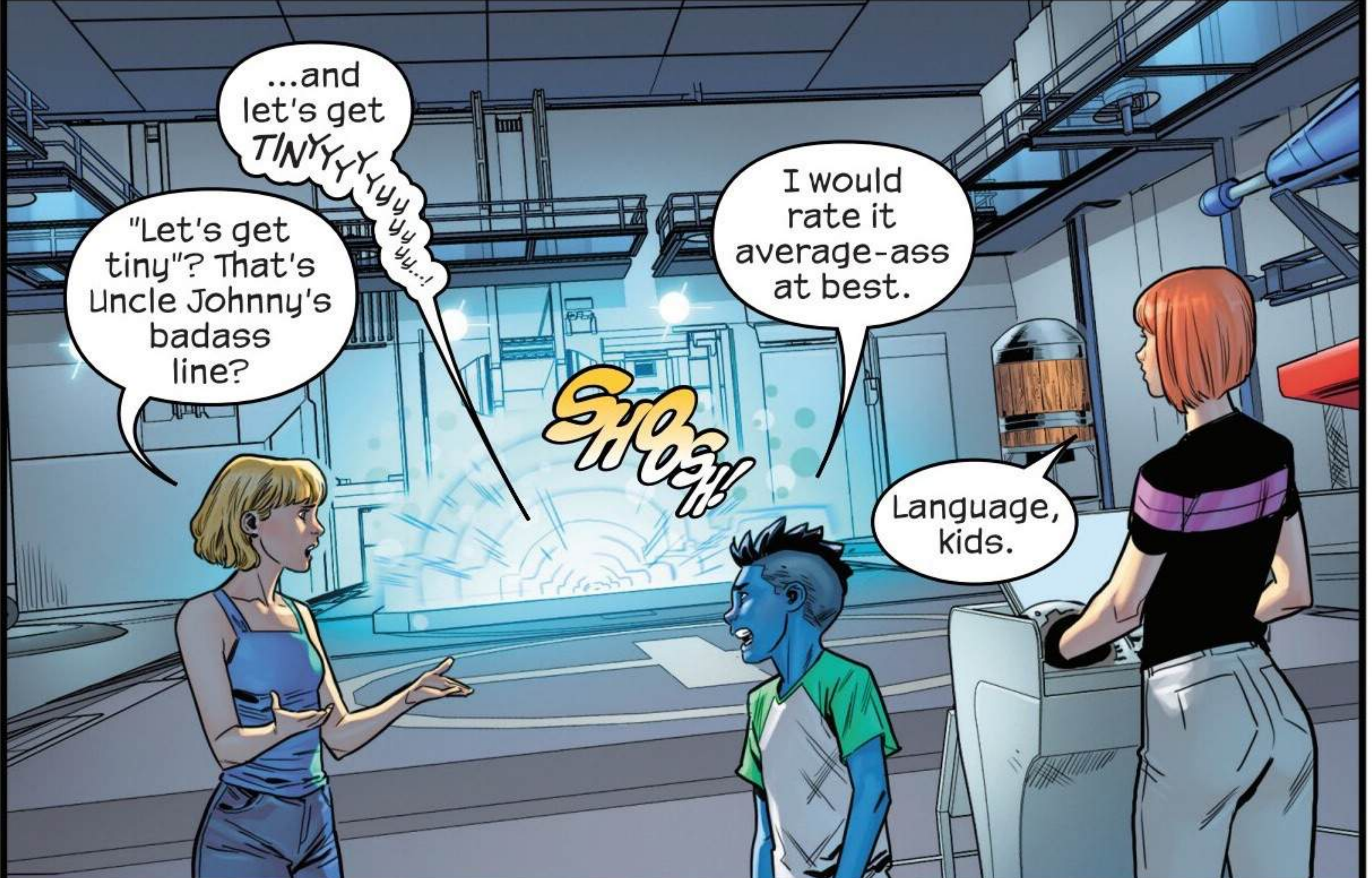


I believe I've **preserved** the particle that hit me back in Arizona. The craft is designed to tunnel toward it, which should allow us to determine what's wrong with it.

Got a green board here, team: All units are go.



So buckle up...

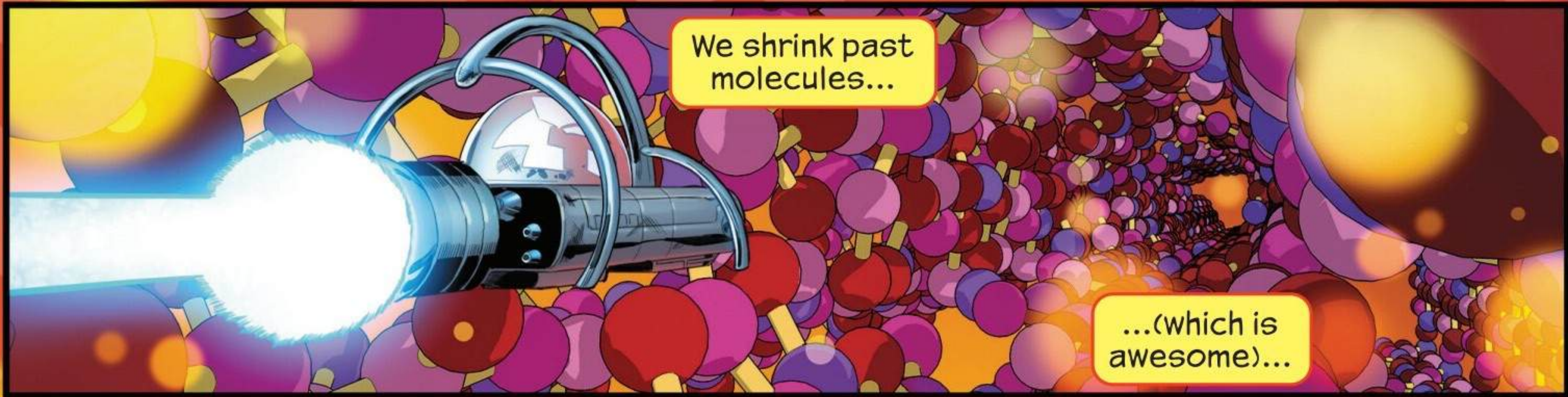


...and let's get **TINYyyyy**...

"Let's get tiny"? That's Uncle Johnny's badass line?

I would rate it average-ass at best.

Language, kids.



We shrink past molecules...

...(which is awesome)...



...past atoms, past almost the very *idea* of space...

...(again-- it's honestly pretty neat)...

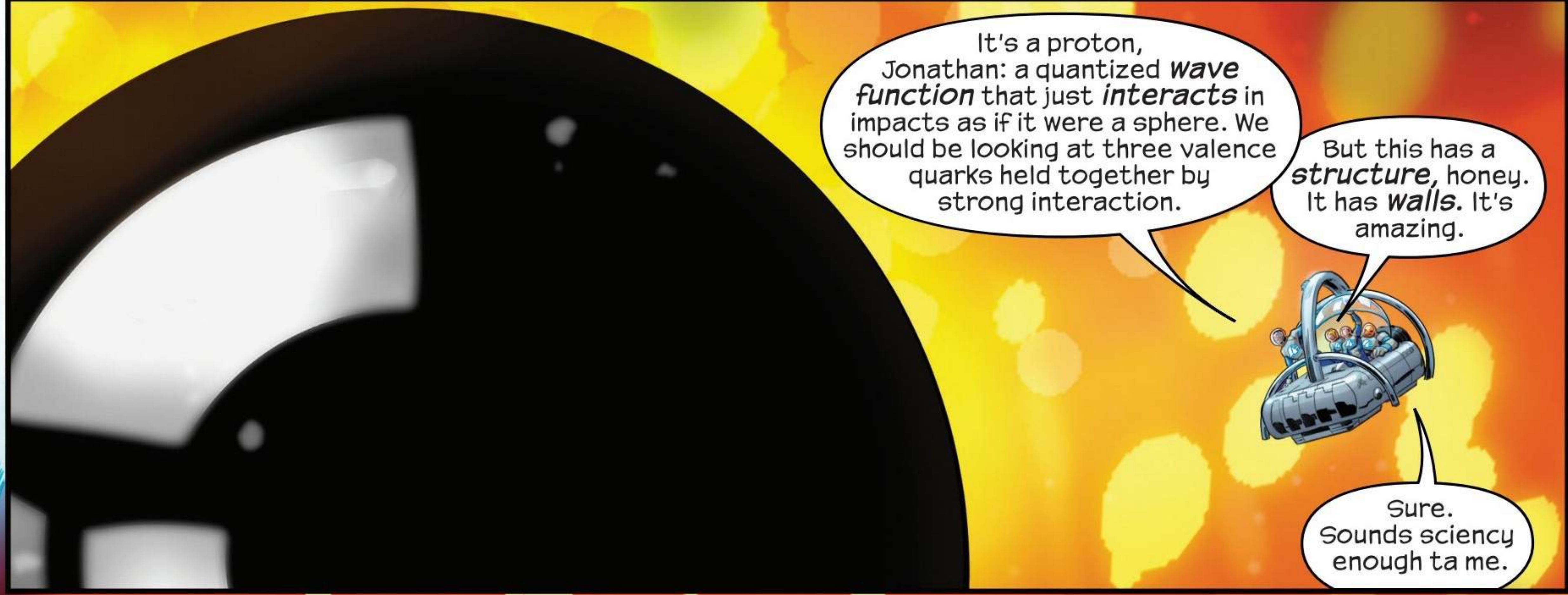
...until we're at what I'm told is the *preonic* level, and find ourselves approaching an OMG particle that, to us, is as big as a *house*.



Astounding. It's *solid*.



It shouldn't be?



It's a proton, Jonathan: a quantized *wave function* that just *interacts* in impacts as if it were a sphere. We should be looking at three valence quarks held together by strong interaction.

But this has a *structure*, honey. It has *walls*. It's amazing.



Sure. Sounds sciency enough ta me.

So lemme ask ya a *question*. If protons ain't even supposed ta have *walls*...

...how come *this* one's got itself a *door*?

A door implies an *interior*. But to *hollow out* an elementary particle, it's-- it's *unbelievable*. Impossible. Why, it'd...

...it'd turn it into a *ship*, Reed.

The world's smallest.

Great Scott.

That's Reed for "kick-ass."

An air lock. Which means there could be someone on the other side...

That's Sue for "let's find out more."

Well?! What's the holdup?

Let's go meet our *pilot*!

And that's me for "hey, anyone *else* up for rushing in where angels fear to tread?"



Unfortunately, it was no use. The alien pilot--whoever he was--**died** just after we made contact.

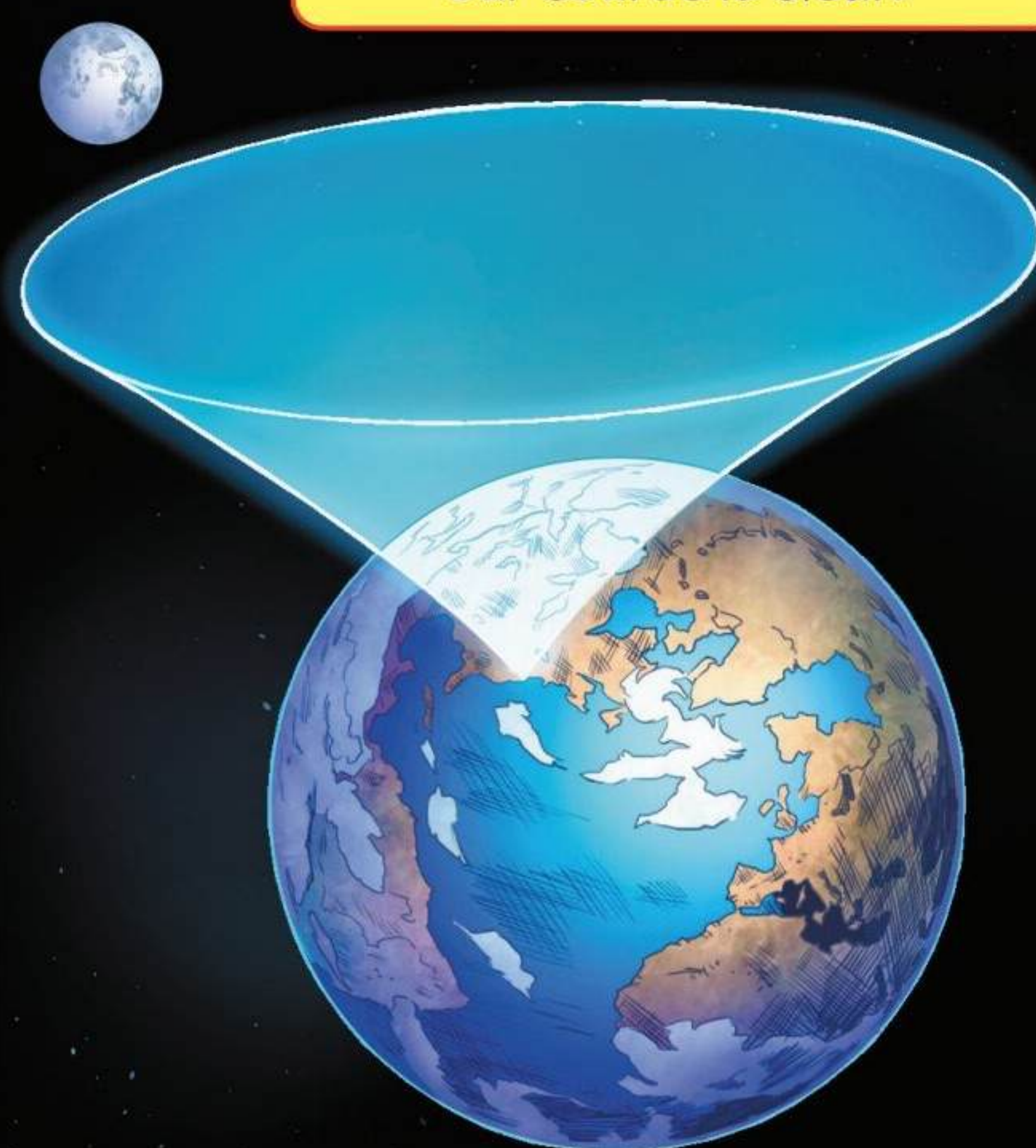
He didn't even try to choke me a *little*.



But at least now that we know what these particles **are**, Sue can harden her force-fields at the **subatomic** level...

...thereby funneling them toward us instead of **everyone else**.

The planet is, for now, safe--and we have **hundreds** of particles arriving in the Baxter Building. And if each of **them** are quark-ships--then our course is clear.



We *help*.

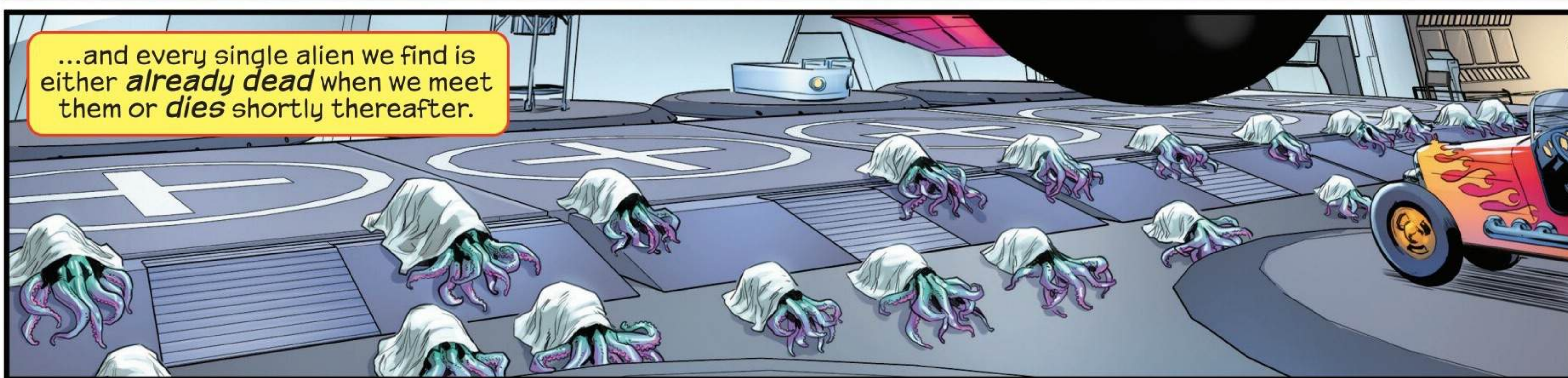
Remember: shrink down, try to save them and come back. **No risks**, kids.

Buddy system: Everyone's responsible for their partner, okay?

I'll work on figuring out a way to **communicate** with them from here.

Every single one of us does what we can...

...and every single alien we find is either **already dead** when we meet them or **dies** shortly thereafter.





It can't be *disease*--there *aren't* any at preonic scale, and we've sterilized the garage.

It's *baffling*. I'm making progress on understanding their *systems*, and even their *language*...

...but we still don't know what's happening or *why*.

Reed! Sue! Come quick!



We finally got a live one here--*literally*!

ΣΠΔΡ
ΡΔΑΩΡΣ.
ΤΩΟΛΩΡ
ΠΟΔΡ!

Let me power up my translation matrix--one moment!!



ΠΣΡΣ.
ΠΟΔΡΣΔΩΡΣ!!

Keep talking so the matrix can learn. Can you--?

ΣΠΔΡ
ΡΔΑΩΡΣ. ΤΩΟΛΩΡ
ΠΟΔΡ. I've this world!



And here it comes! It's the moment I hinted at way back at the start!

I need to leave this planet!



NOW!

Grrk!

I am kicking butt at this foreshadowing thing.





④ Reed's Research Log, installment 4F7C24:
I've always been inspired by the National Transport Safety Board's aircraft-crash investigations.

With future lives and the safety of air travel itself on the line, the NTSB relies entirely on *science* and *observation*. They assume nothing and record only *verifiable facts*.

If flight x of aircraft y crashes on flight path z, they don't report, "We've found the wreckage of flight x." They report "Wreckage was observed consistent with a model y aircraft impacting terrain beneath flight path z."

Why? Because before they've found actual evidence that this *was* flight x, they can't rule out the possibility of a second unregistered flight, in the same type of plane, traveling in the same direction, that may *also* have crashed entirely unnoticed.

Assume nothing.
Trust only what you can *verify*.

So.



Grrrk!

Hold still, Johnny...!

No! I need to leave! Now!

An alien was observed consistent with those we've found crashing to Earth in spaceships built out of hollowed-out protons.

Unlike all the others, it was neither dead nor dying--and its arrival coincided with the *end* of the proton impacts.

Communication was established.



Okay. I...
apologize if my
behavior was startling.
You have to understand:
I need to leave, and I
couldn't know if you'd
be *friendly*.

We're
friendly.
But why are
you--?

Your world's
technology seems
advanced enough
to have particle
accelerators.
Is that true?



I glance at Sue.
Her answer comes in *Braille*
force-fields running across
the fingertips of myself and
the rest of my family:

"Explore--but be
careful." NTSB rules:
trust only what we
can *verify*.



My name is "Reed,"
and our world--Earth--has
several. I've built my own
Fantastically Large Hadron
Collider under this building--
and much of *New York*
state.

It *could* be
adjusted to send
a particle out into
space.

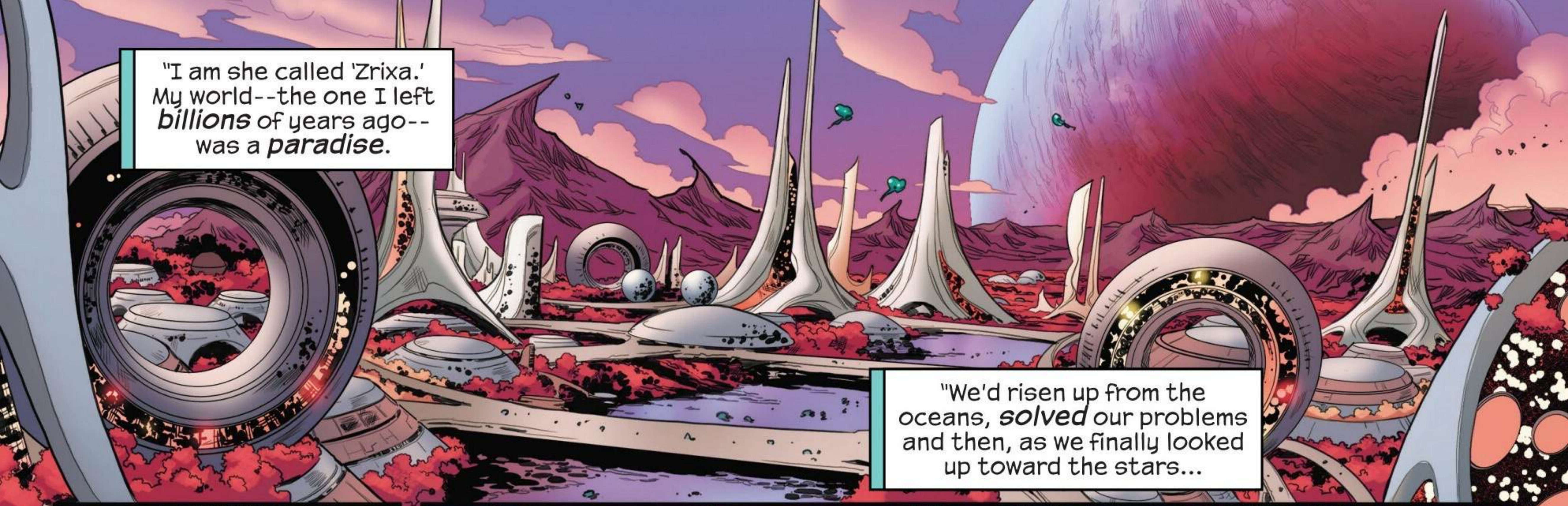
But we'd
like to know more
before we let you
use it.



Time is of the essence.
Please get started on
the adjustments now, and
I'll explain more in
parallel.

We humans
gladly trade *effort*
for *knowledge*.
I'll begin the
alterations.

It's not a lie:
I'll *begin* them. I just
won't *complete* them
until I know it's safe
to do so.

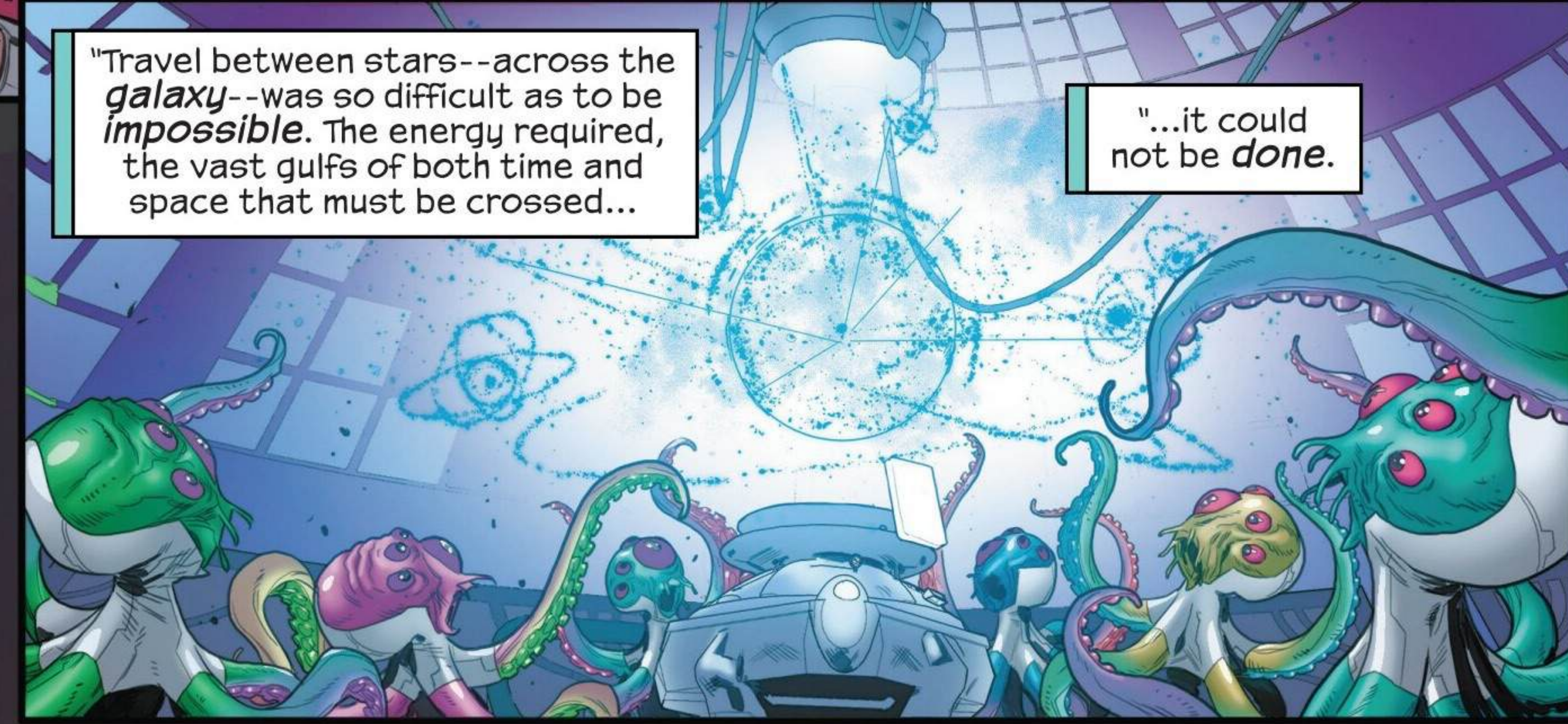


"I am she called 'Zrixa.'
My world--the one I left
billions of years ago--
was a *paradise*.

"We'd risen up from the
oceans, *solved* our problems
and then, as we finally looked
up toward the stars...



"...we found
them to be *beyond*
our reach.

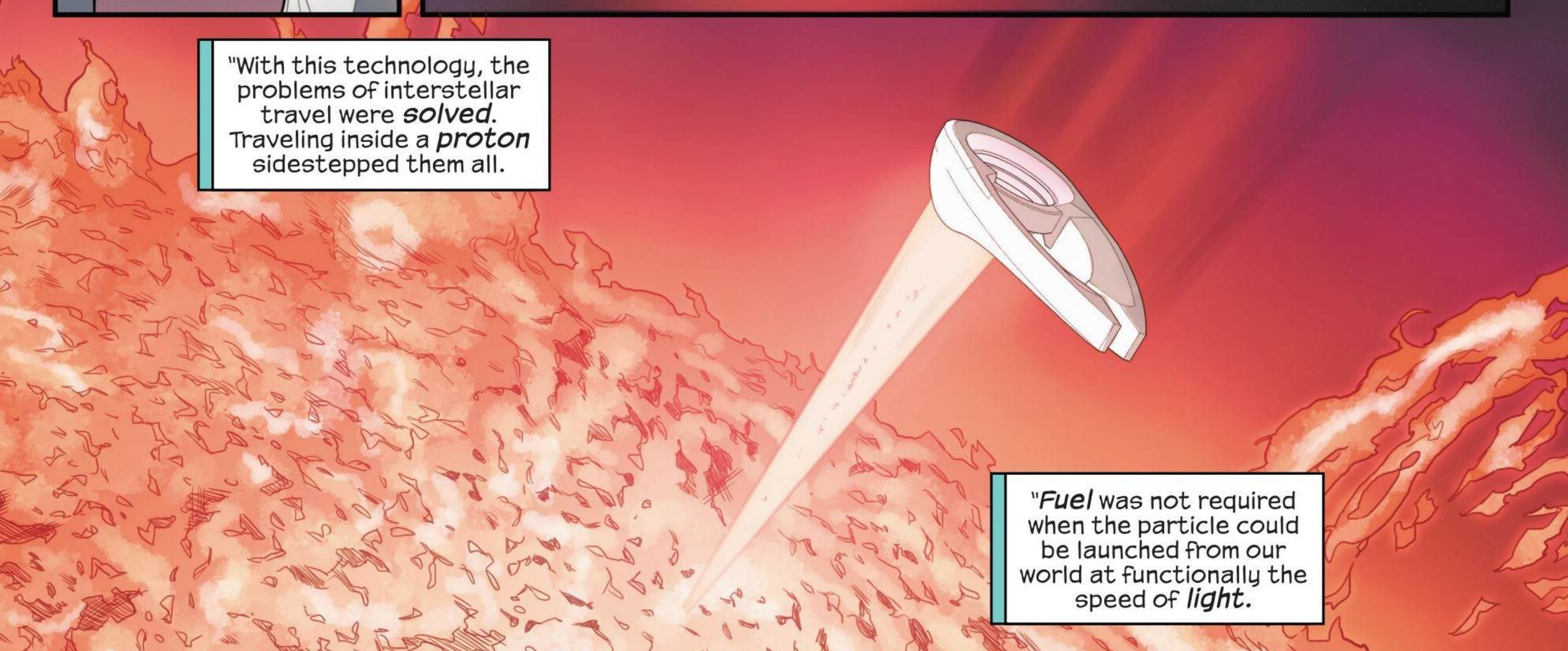


"Travel between stars--across the
galaxy--was so difficult as to be
impossible. The energy required,
the vast gulfs of both time and
space that must be crossed...

"...it could
not be *done*.



"But then we discovered an
exotic particle--formed only
deep within our *sun*--that
allowed one to adjust their
size: to *shrink*, and then to
return to *normal scale*.



"With this technology, the
problems of interstellar
travel were *solved*.
Traveling inside a *proton*
sidestepped them all.

"*Fuel* was not required
when the particle could
be launched from our
world at functionally the
speed of *light*.



"And the length of the
journey was *irrelevant*
when time dilation kept
you from *aging*."



Great Scott. The faster one travels, the *slower* time goes, compared to everyone else. And when voyaging *inside* a cosmic ray traveling at almost the speed of light...

...then crossing the galaxy--a journey of billions of years--is experienced in mere *seconds*.



Sorry, I'm confused. If this is all *space exploration*, then what's the deal with all the dead and dying peeps hitting us?

Aren't you *not* supposed to age at those speeds, like, at all?

Protons solved the problem of *travel*, but not the problem of *control*. You can't steer a *proton*--and even if we could, time dilation meant we'd never *react* in time to do so.

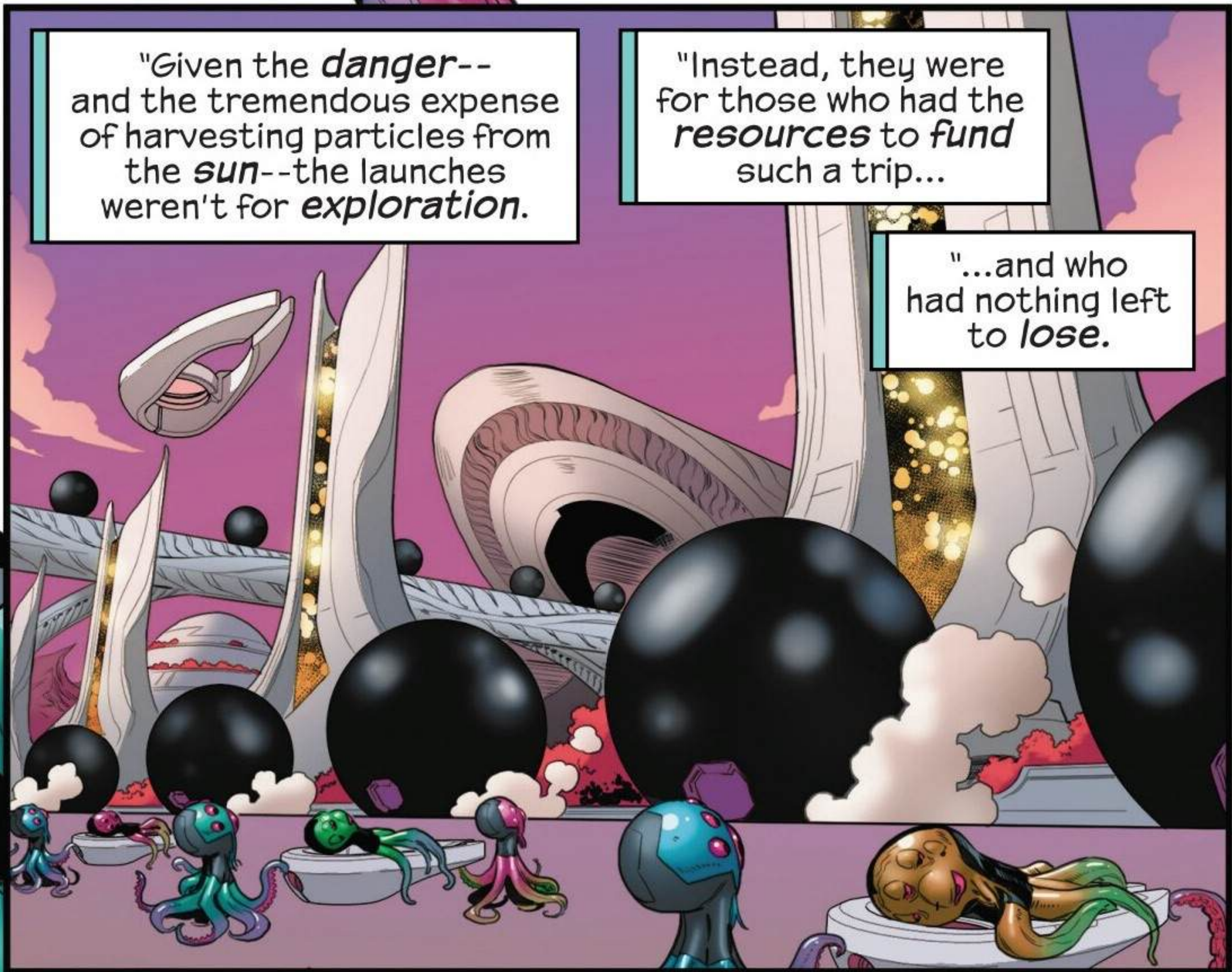
And at these distances, aiming is *optimistic* at best. For each that *hit* a world, thousands more would *miss*.



"Given the *danger*--and the tremendous expense of harvesting particles from the *sun*--the launches weren't for *exploration*.

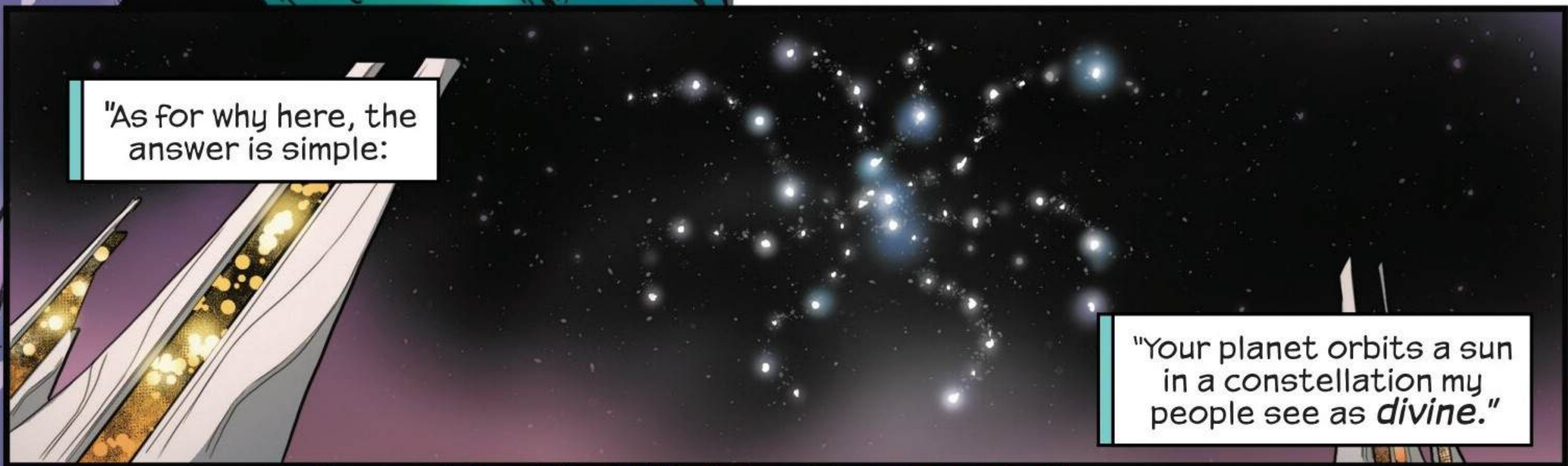
"Instead, they were for those who had the *resources* to *fund* such a trip...

"...and who had nothing left to *lose*.



"As for why here, the answer is simple:

"Your planet orbits a sun in a constellation my people see as *divine*."





I don't know why our ships are arriving all at once. Perhaps some interstellar phenomenon modified our trajectories. There's no way to tell.

Wait. Sorry, you're saying this whole thing is just-- *space cryonics*?

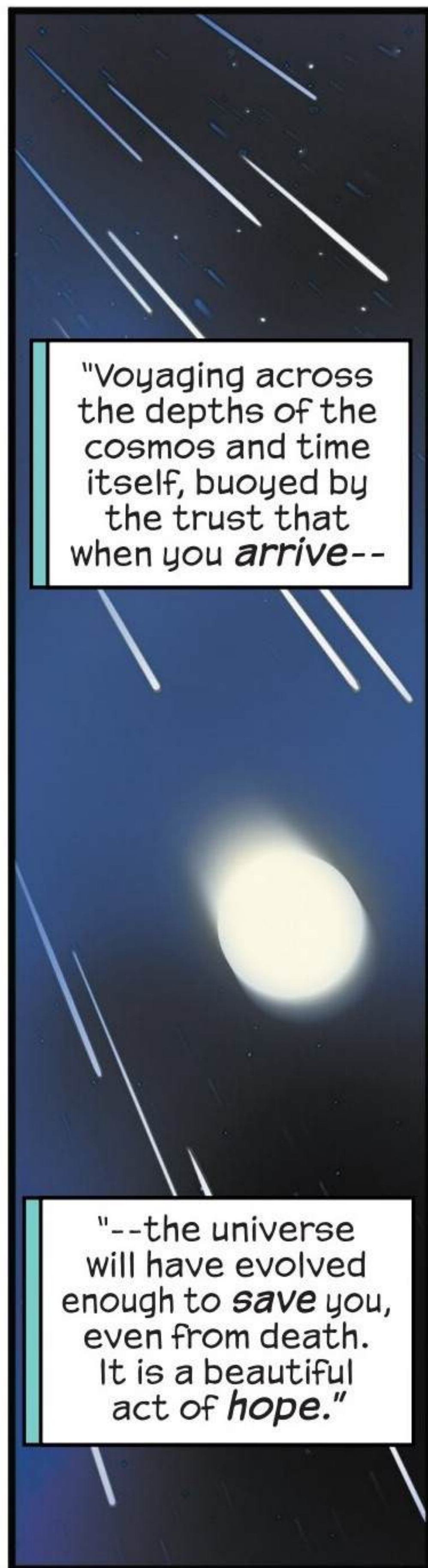
A bunch of rich people who don't want to die, so they grasp at *any* straw--no matter how unlikely, how expensive--for just a *chance* to *cheat* death?



Yes. And there is no *shame* in it. My world is *free*. Those who've *earned* tremendous wealth are allowed to spend it *however* they please.

Look, I--

And there is a great *grace* and *beauty* in what we've done.



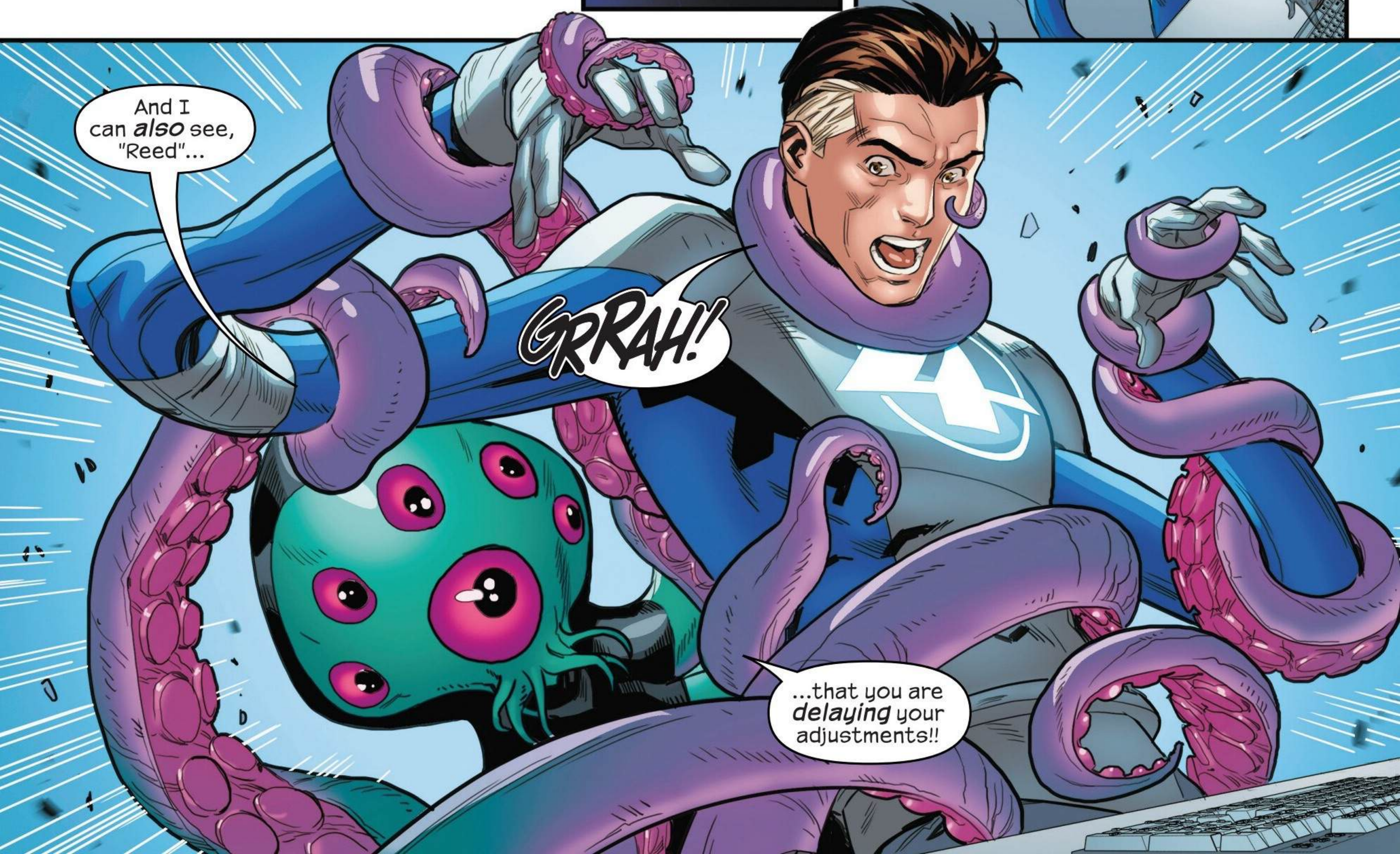
"Voyaging across the depths of the cosmos and time itself, buoyed by the trust that when you *arrive*--

--the universe will have evolved enough to *save* you, even from death. It is a beautiful act of *hope*."



But why th' rush ta *leave* now? Yer not dead or dyin' like th' others. You got plenty of time, don't ya?

Because I can see at a glance that your "Earth" is not advanced enough to save us. I must voyage farther into space, farther into the *future*.



And I can *also* see, "Reed"...

GRRAH!

...that you are *delaying* your adjustments!!





The computer's picking up *radio waves* from the same region of space the particles have been coming from.

I believe it's *Zrixa's* people, and I suspect it might allow us to *verify* how much of what she's told us is *true*.



To send a message across the galaxy, they'd need to encode what they want to say using *math* and *universal constants*-- just like we did at *Arecibo*.

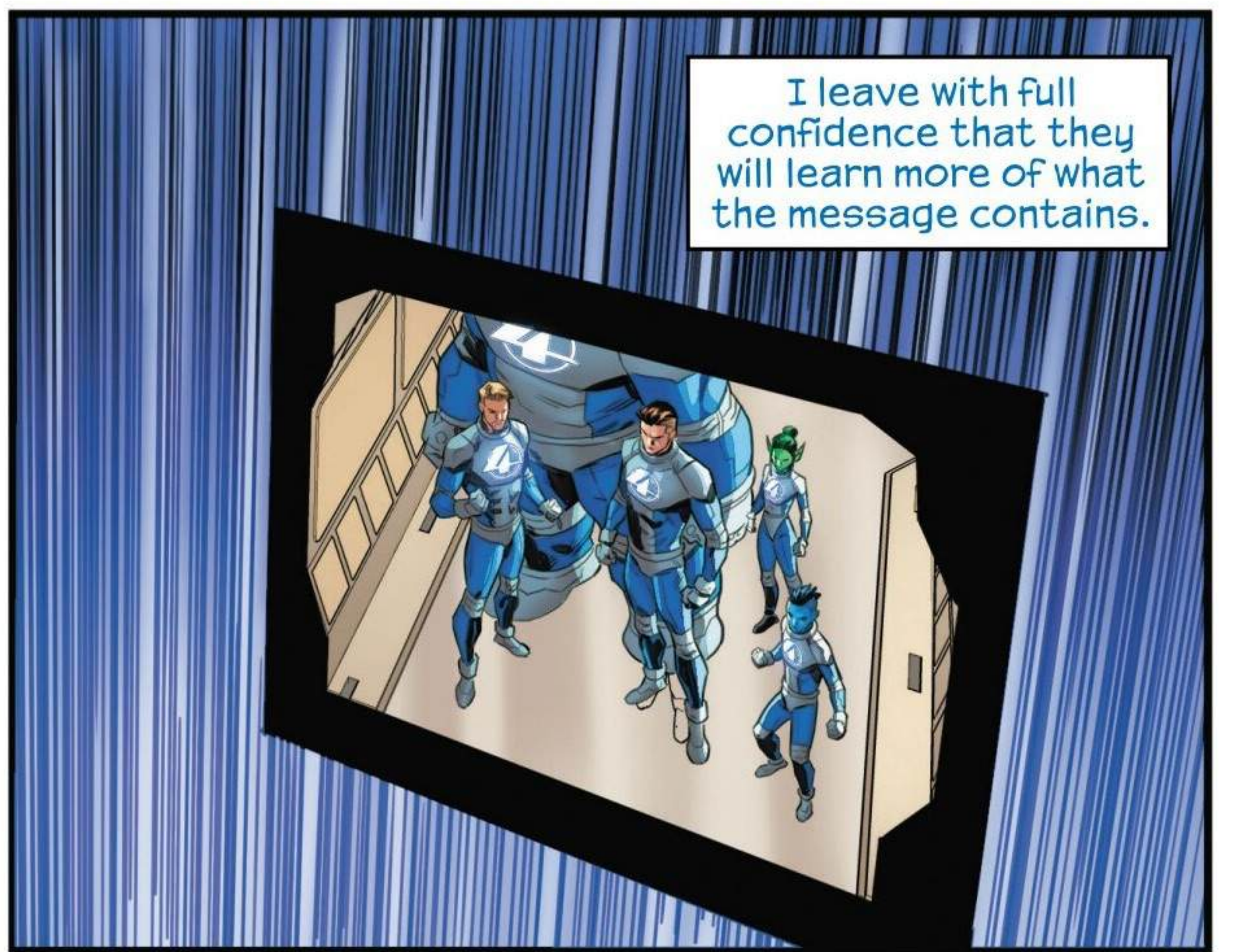
Precisely. And decoding an unknown *alien message* would benefit from the skills of *scientists*, of *archaeologists* and of *artists*.

Honey-- *go*. We're on it.

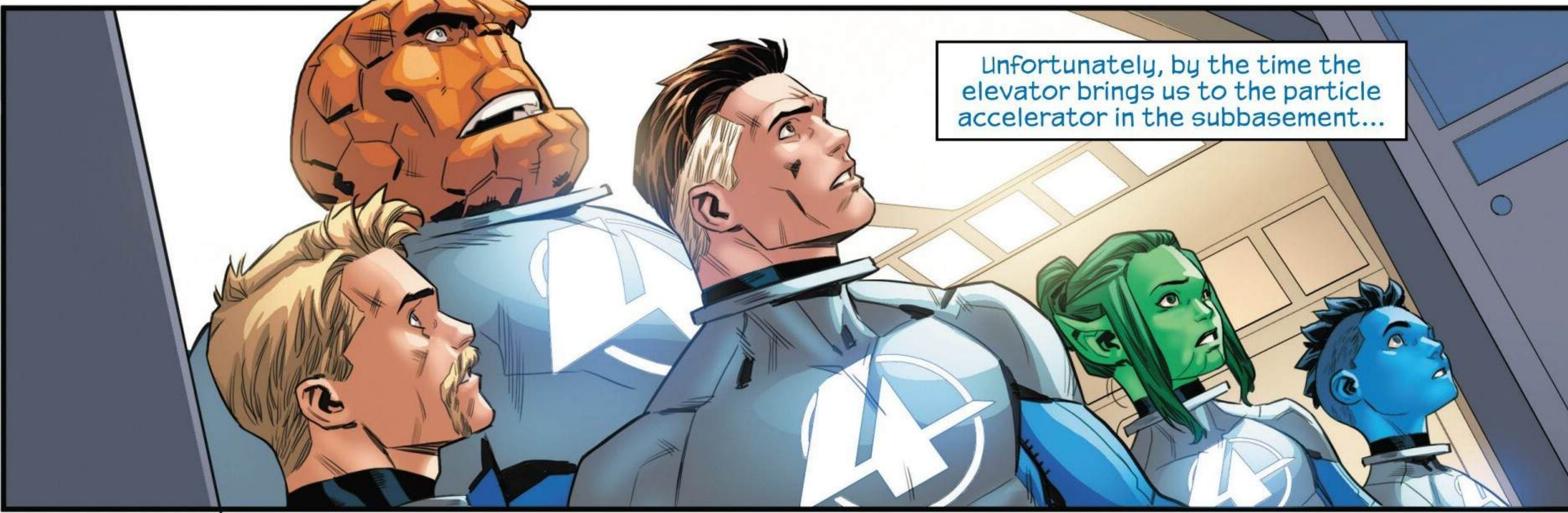


You're spectacular, Sue.

You all are.



I leave with full confidence that they will learn more of what the message contains.



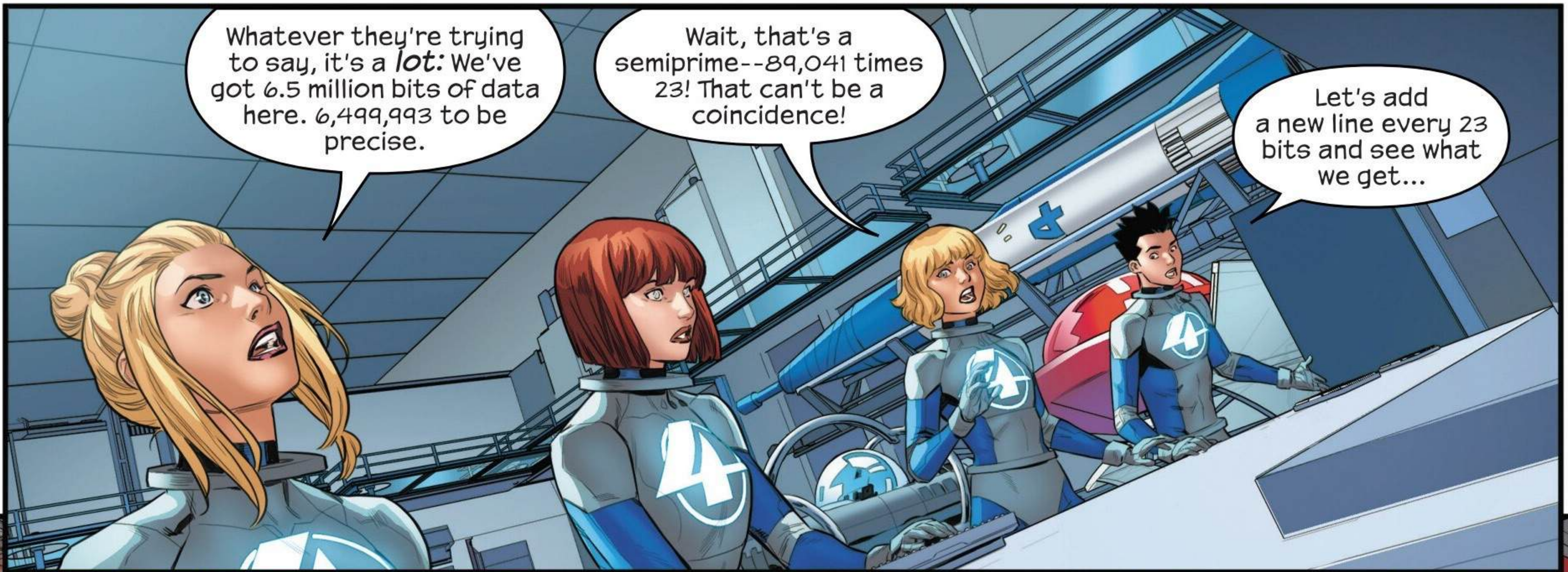
Unfortunately, by the time the elevator brings us to the particle accelerator in the subbasement...

...Zrixa was observed having almost finalized her adjustments to my machinery--suggesting we'd arrived *too late*.

ZRIXA!
Stop this!

You can't make me stop anything. And even if you could...

...why, Reed, I simply wouldn't *allow* you to.



Whatever they're trying to say, it's a *lot*: We've got 6.5 million bits of data here. 6,499,993 to be precise.

Wait, that's a semiprime--89,041 times 23! That can't be a coincidence!

Let's add a new line every 23 bits and see what we get...



Grah! What are you-- fireproof?

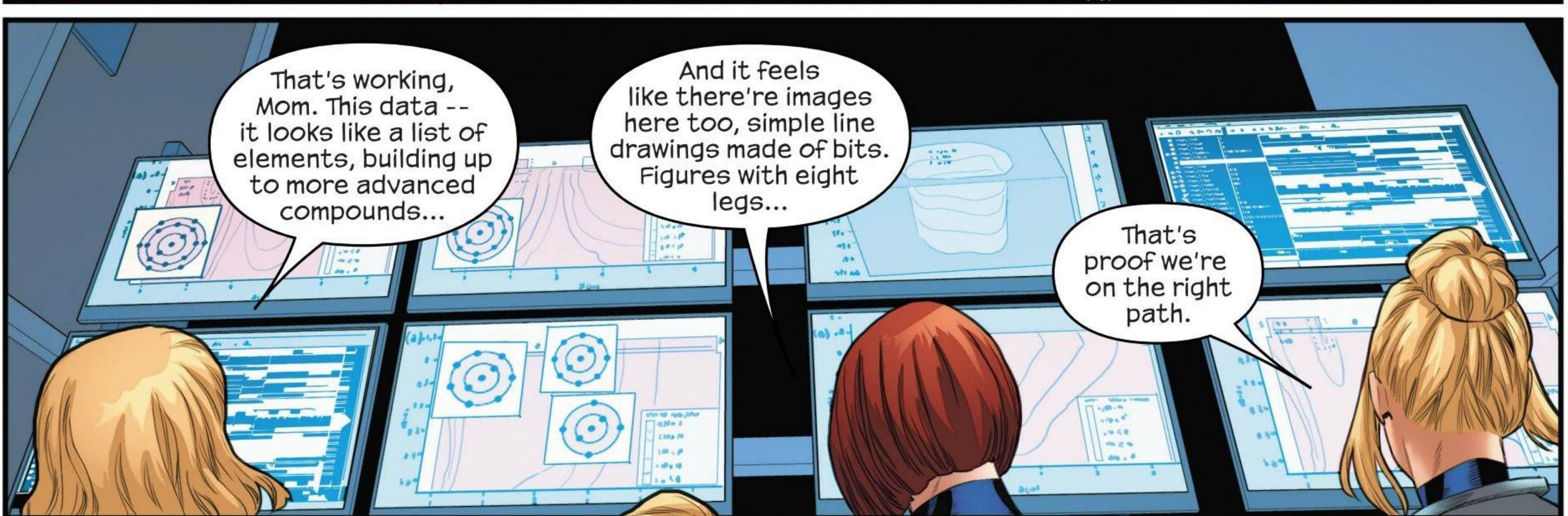
And what are you, *not* fireproof?

Zrixa-- tell us what you *want*.

You were right, Reed: I'm not sick like the others. I didn't take this trip because I *had* to.



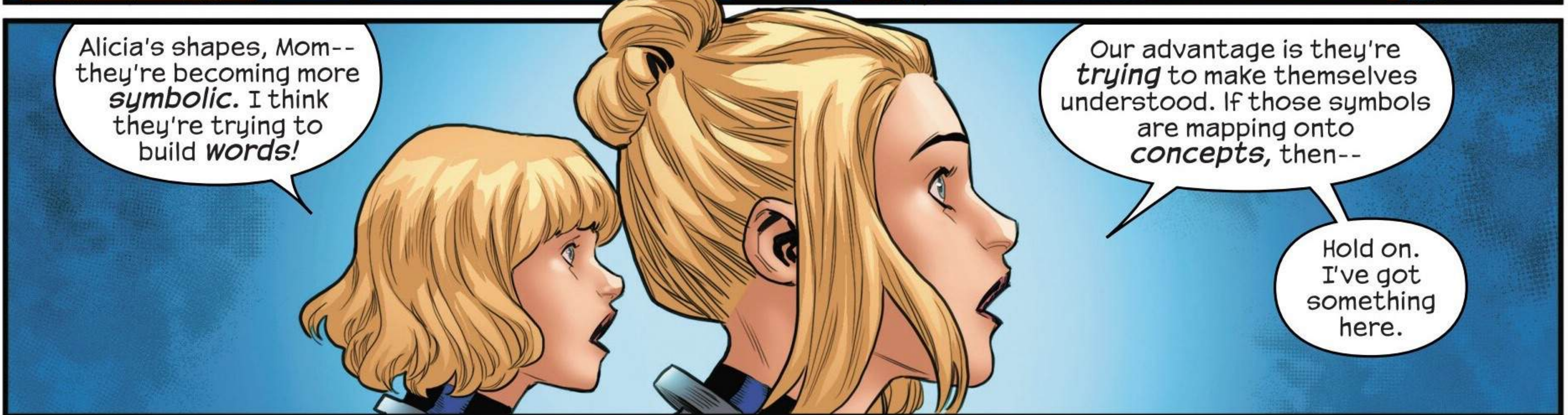
I took this trip because I *wanted* to.



That's working, Mom. This data -- it looks like a list of elements, building up to more advanced compounds...

And it feels like there're images here too, simple line drawings made of bits. Figures with eight legs...

That's proof we're on the right path.



Alicia's shapes, Mom-- they're becoming more *symbolic*. I think they're trying to build *words*!

Our advantage is they're *trying* to make themselves understood. If those symbols are mapping onto *concepts*, then--

Hold on. I've got something here.





The particle accelerator-- whatever changes she's made, they're powering up! I can't shut it down!

Then I'm going after her! We don't know what she has planned, but I don't suspect it's *good*.

Then we're--

No, old friend: There's only the *one* encounter suit! It's for adjustments at microscale--I never foresaw *this* scale of emergency!



This message-- it's telling us their *history*, Reed.

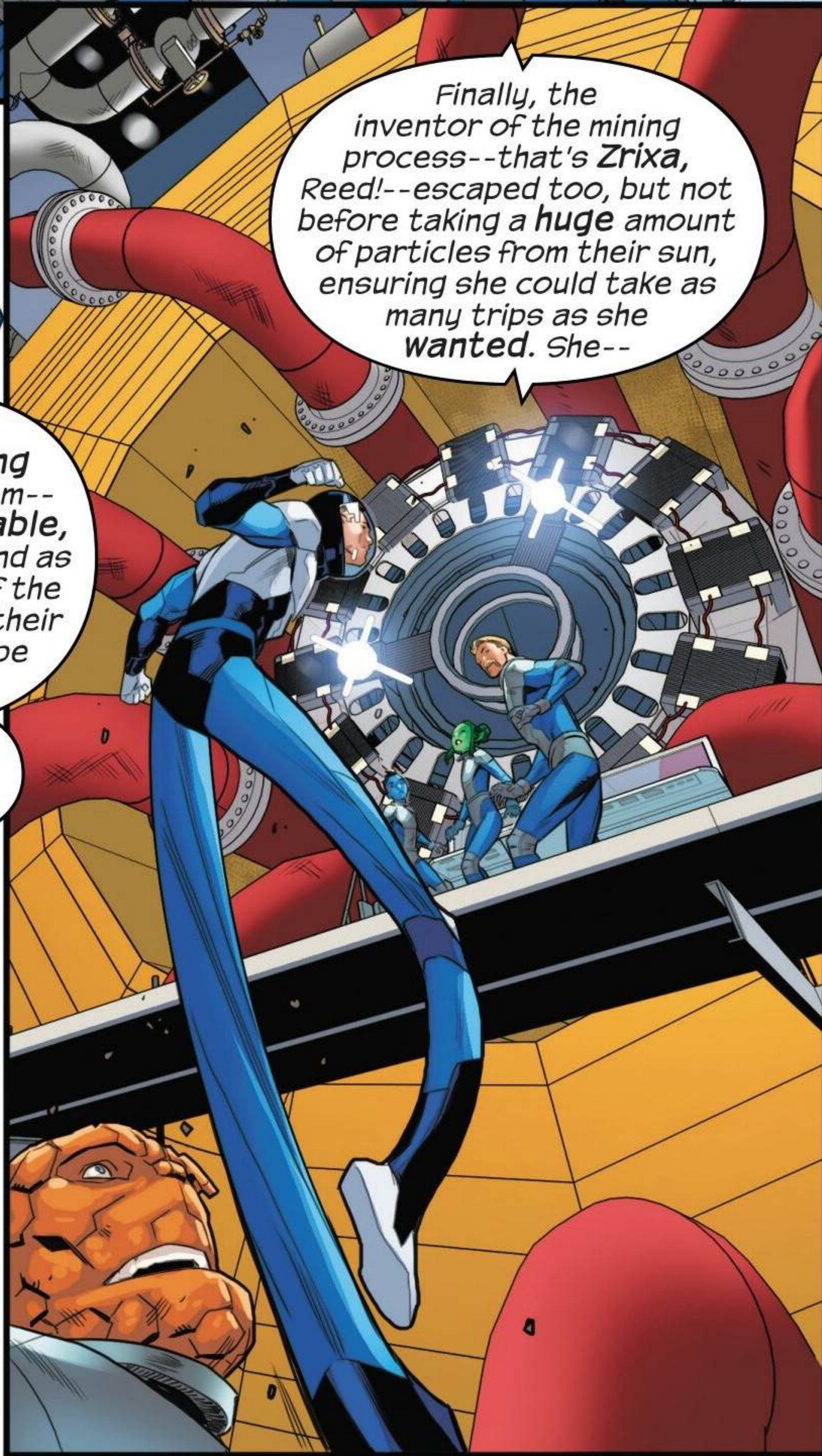
Zrixa told us *part* of the truth: Shrinking particles *were* mined from their sun's core, and that's what made their proton-ships *possible*...

...but she didn't tell us that taking those particles caused their sun to *dim* with each and *every* harvest!



This mining was slowly killing their solar system-- but it was *profitable*, so it continued. And as more and more of the *dying rich* used their money to escape into space...

...their sun got *darker* every time.



Finally, the inventor of the mining process--that's *Zrixa, Reed!*--escaped too, but not before taking a *huge* amount of particles from their sun, ensuring she could take as many trips as she *wanted*. She--



Dear God. She *extinguished* it. The people who sent this message, billions of years ago...

...Reed, they were *freezing to death*.

I'm wrapping myself around a **second** particle, accelerating toward Zrixa's. The strain is **unbearable**.

I distract myself with **reason**.

Why Zrixa's urgency to **leave**? She left her world an **eternity** ago. What possible rush could there be, **unless**...

And then the voices of my family in my earpiece **confirm** what I already **suspect**.

Reed, these people **hated** Zrixa and what she'd done to them. They're saying--they're going to clean up their **mess**.

Wait, the message has changed back to mathematics now... It's--

Oh my God.

These are the formulae for **nuclear fission**, Mom. They're the equations for **atomic bombs**...

...and they're repeating over and over.

I try to reply, but my family can't **hear** me. Comms drop as I approach relativistic speeds and leave their time frame.

A second in here is already two or three out there. I have to move **fast** before time runs out.

Thankfully, I can see Zrixa's ship...

...which means it's time to go to **work**.



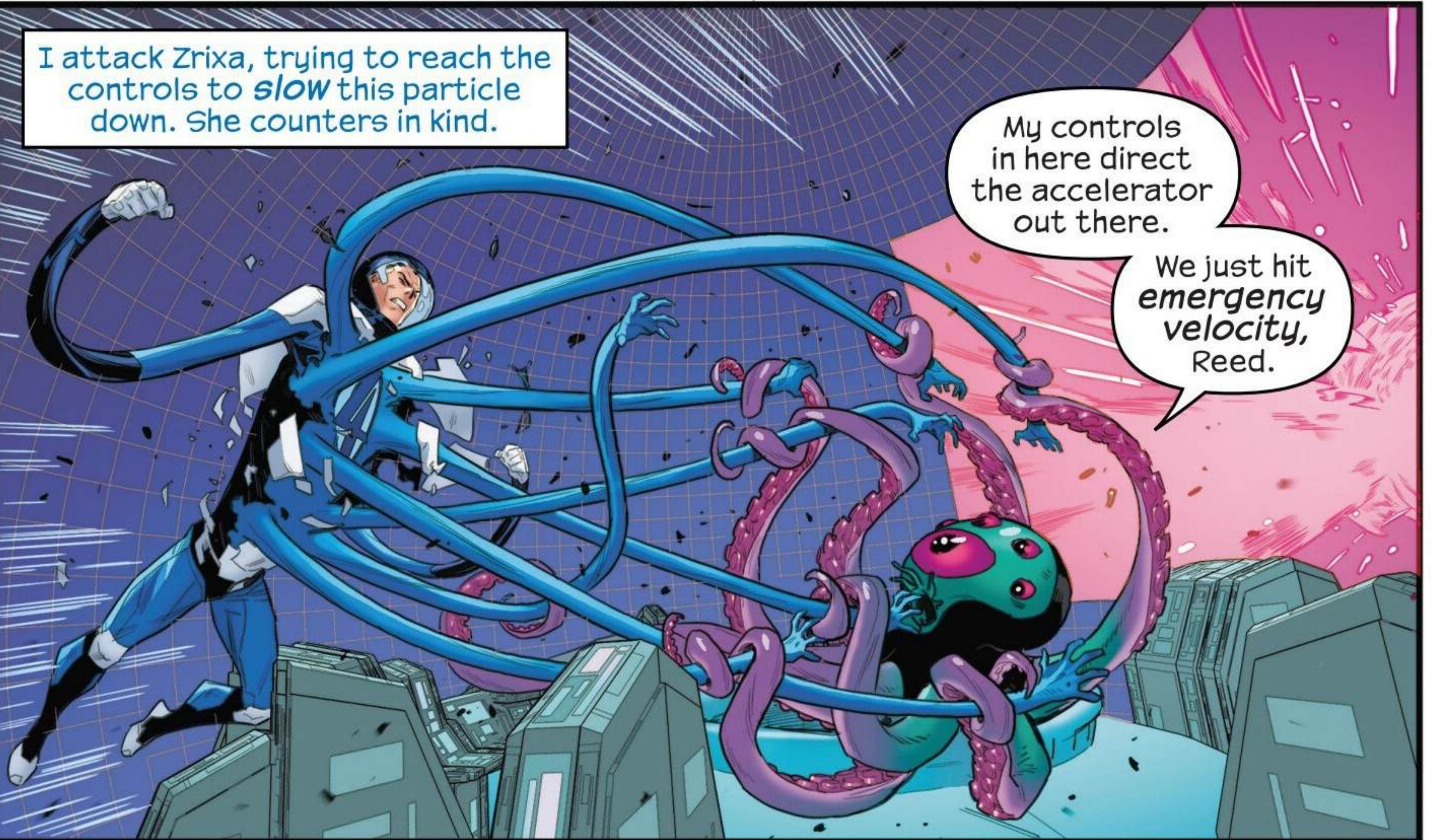
Zrixa!
Stop this--
now!

Reed!
How did
you...?!



No
matter.

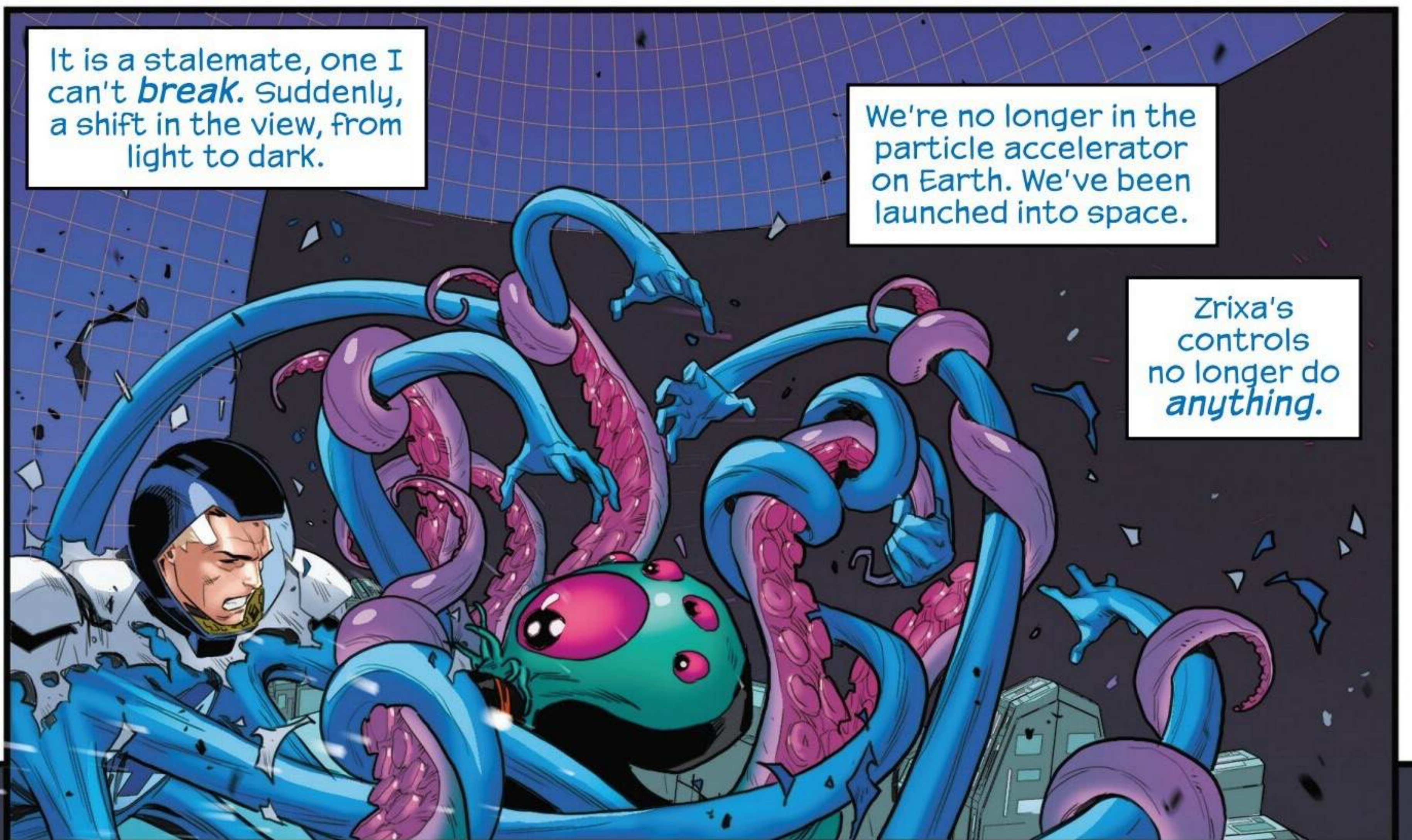
You cannot
possibly
intervene.



I attack Zrixa, trying to reach the
controls to *slow* this particle
down. She counters in kind.

My controls
in here direct
the accelerator
out there.

We just hit
*emergency
velocity*,
Reed.



It is a stalemate, one I
can't *break*. Suddenly,
a shift in the view, from
light to dark.

We're no longer in the
particle accelerator
on Earth. We've been
launched into space.

Zrixa's
controls
no longer do
anything.

And though I cannot *discern*
them, our particle-ship screams
past dozens more just like it,
each traveling in the
opposite direction...



...and each carrying
nuclear annihilation
with them.

You *fool!*
Zrixa--you've
doomed us
all!

Ah, you know of the nukes, then.
Now you see why I was so
anxious to *leave*.

Some people
simply don't *agree*
with the *freedoms*
my wealth has
earned me.

The nukes are *nothing*,
Zrixa. My family has four
dozen ways to deal with
those, *easily*.

Earth will be fine--
WE will not. My particle
accelerator wasn't
aimed anywhere!

We're headed toward *empty space*. We're
tearing across the cosmos at the speed
of light--towards *nothing*, Zrixa.

Nothing will ever
slow us down. We will *never*
interact with another particle again,
until the universe is so old that
even protons *decay*.

When we
finally stop
moving...

...there
won't be
anything
left.

thunk

Damn you. You got your wish--
you get to live. And I do too.
We're trapped here with each
other, for all the eons the
universe has left...

...and for the
handful of *hours*
it'll feel like, in
here, to *us*.

And with all that time, you'll change
nothing, affect *nothing*, never do
anything to make the universe a
better place. That's your
legacy, Zrixa.

We'll die
last...

...and all
that means is
that we'll die the
most alone.

Time passes
so quickly.

I measure it first
by stars going out.

Then I measure it by
the new stars that
fail to *form*.

There're no more gas
clouds left to feed them.

The stars die one
by one until there's
nothing left.

The universe is
expanding faster than
we can *travel* it.

And in the bleak and endless
darkness, somewhere inside a
colossal, sepulchral universe
long since *incapable* of
supporting life--

--our proton finally
disintegrates, and we
tumble into hard vacuum,
just an atom's breadth
above absolute zero.

I'm suffocating and freezing
to death at the same time,
even as my blood boils in the
low pressure. Again, I try to
move past the *pain*. I focus
on reason. I *observe*.

"It's not possible
to experience a
greater cold," I think.
"Isn't that remarkable?
This is what death
feels like."

I try to gather *data*,
draw *conclusions*, even
though I know that my brain
is starving for oxygen--which
means I can trust neither
it nor my senses.

Which is why I now confess:
I've had to move away
from NTSB standards here.
I can't prove anything--
I can't verify a single fact.



But it felt--it felt--
like I'd *encountered*
something in that
empty void.

A
warmth...

...and a hand
that felt like
home.

THIS IS THE TIME
OF THE BECOMING
OF THE NINTH COSMOS.
YOU ARE NOT TO
BE HERE.

THERE IS
A DOOM COMING.
YOU ARE NEEDED
THERE, FOR
YOUR--

F--
F-f--

Like I've previously
stated: I couldn't
trust my senses.

F-ffff--

YES.
FOR YOUR
FAMILY.

Thus, there's
little purpose...

...in dwelling on
it any further.

Franklin?

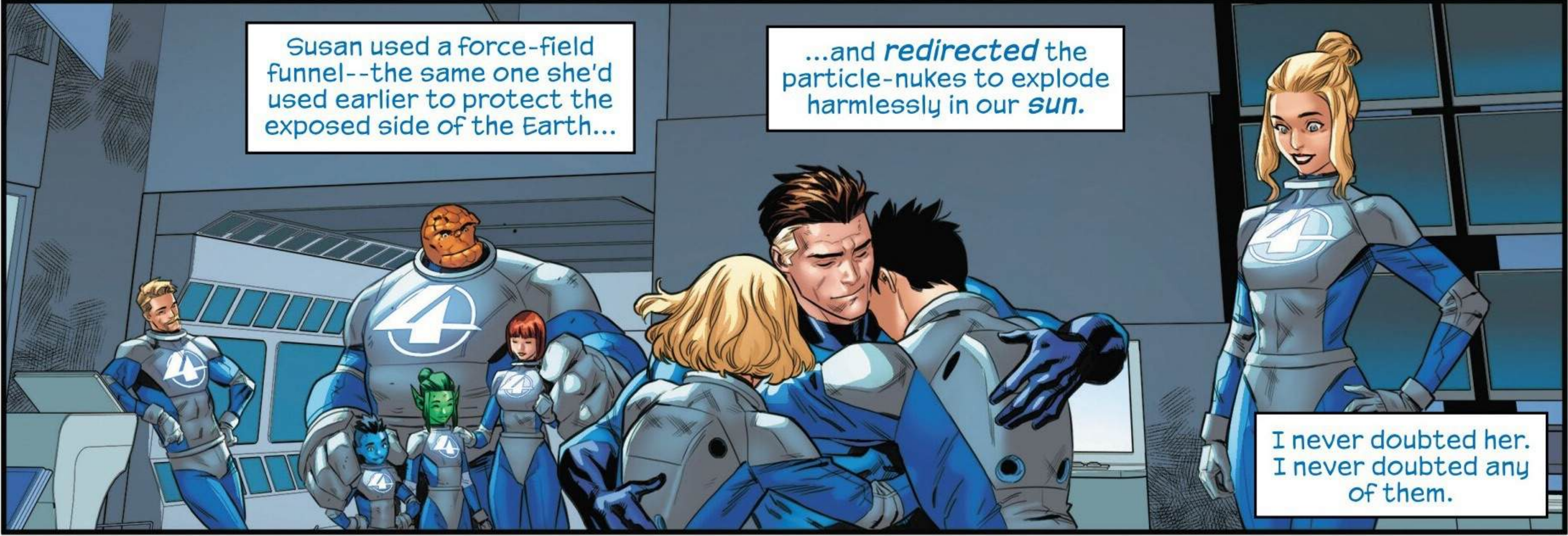


I find myself back at the particle accelerator.

Reed! *There* you are!

I knew ya'd find a way ta *beat* Zrixa!

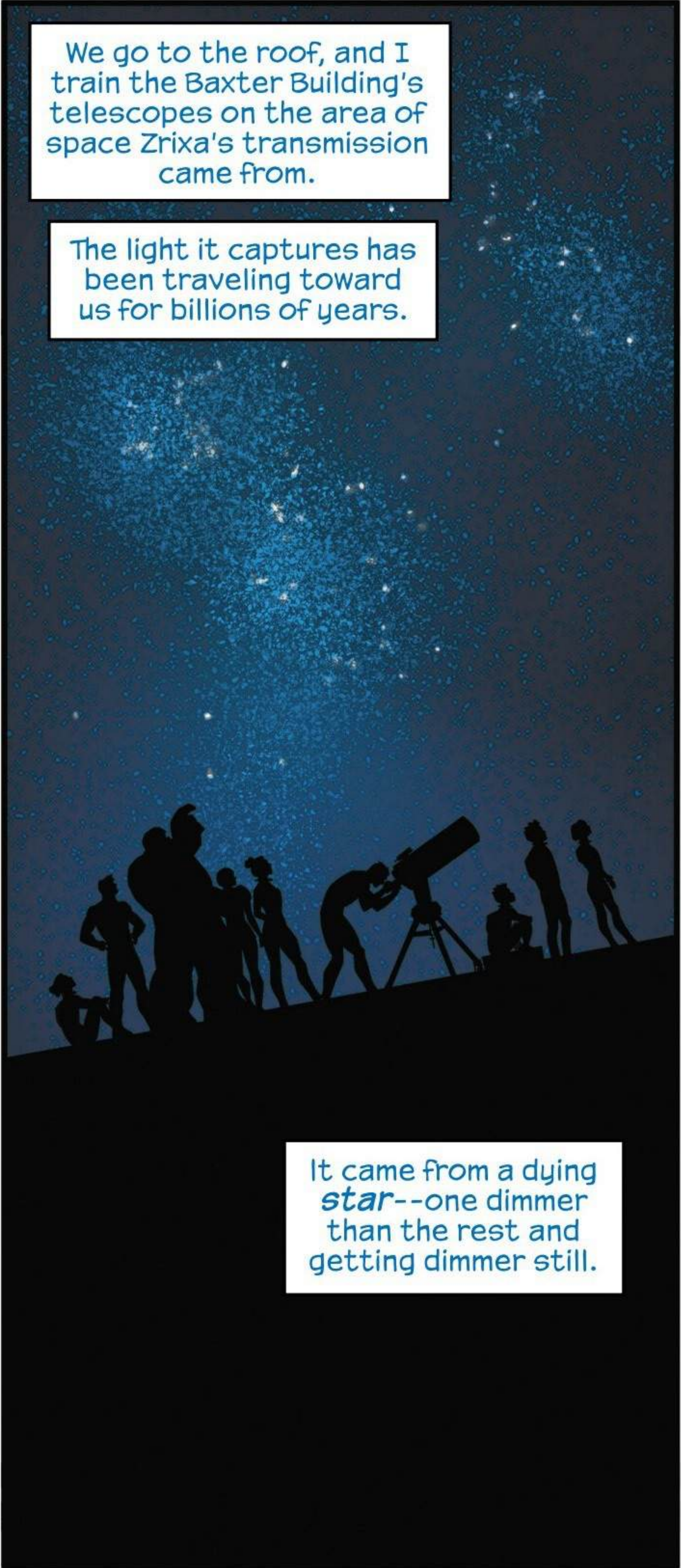
I cannot explain how.



Susan used a force-field funnel--the same one she'd used earlier to protect the exposed side of the Earth...

...and *redirected* the particle-nukes to explode harmlessly in our *sun*.

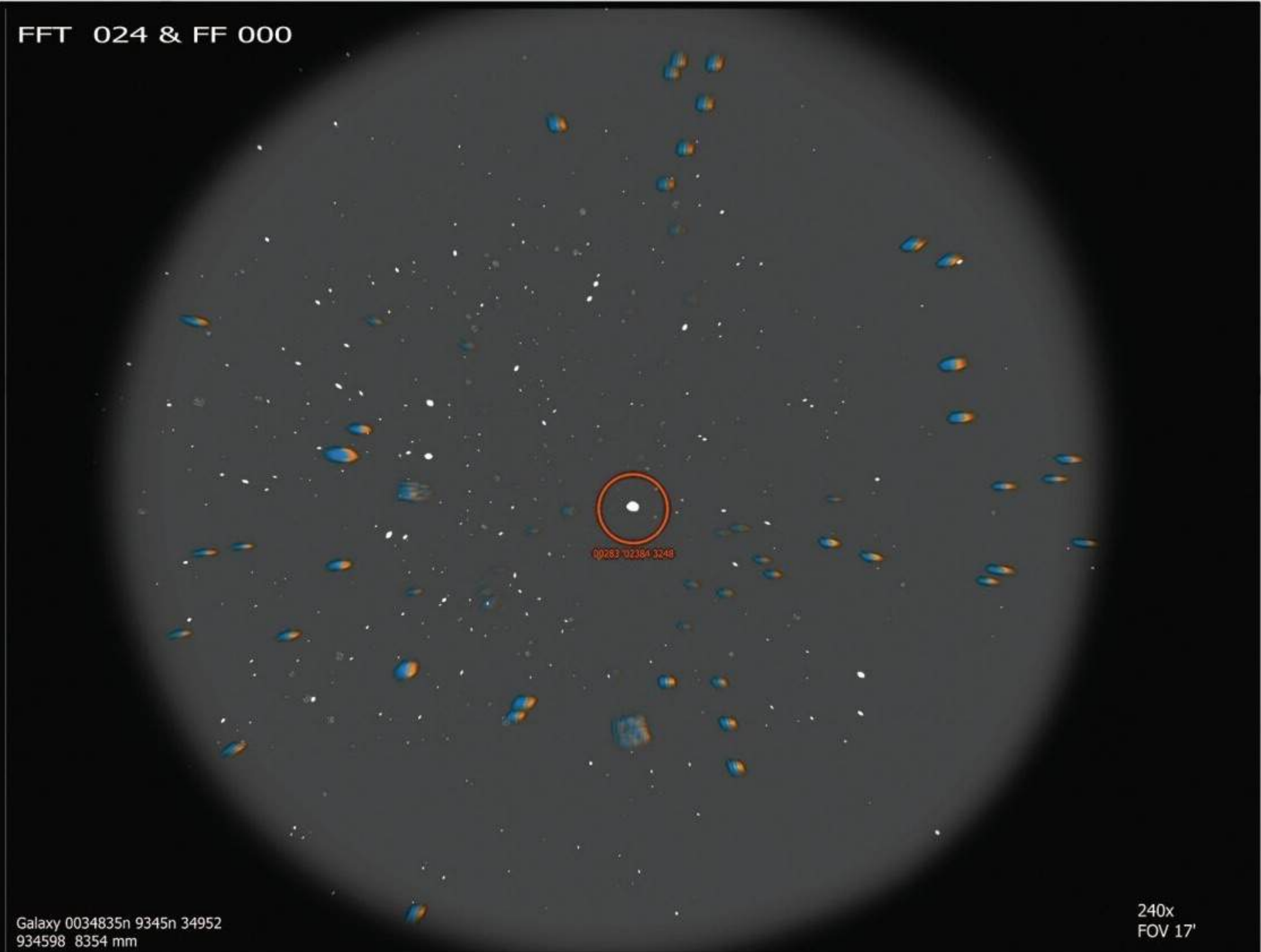
I never doubted her. I never doubted any of them.



We go to the roof, and I train the Baxter Building's telescopes on the area of space Zrixa's transmission came from.

The light it captures has been traveling toward us for billions of years.

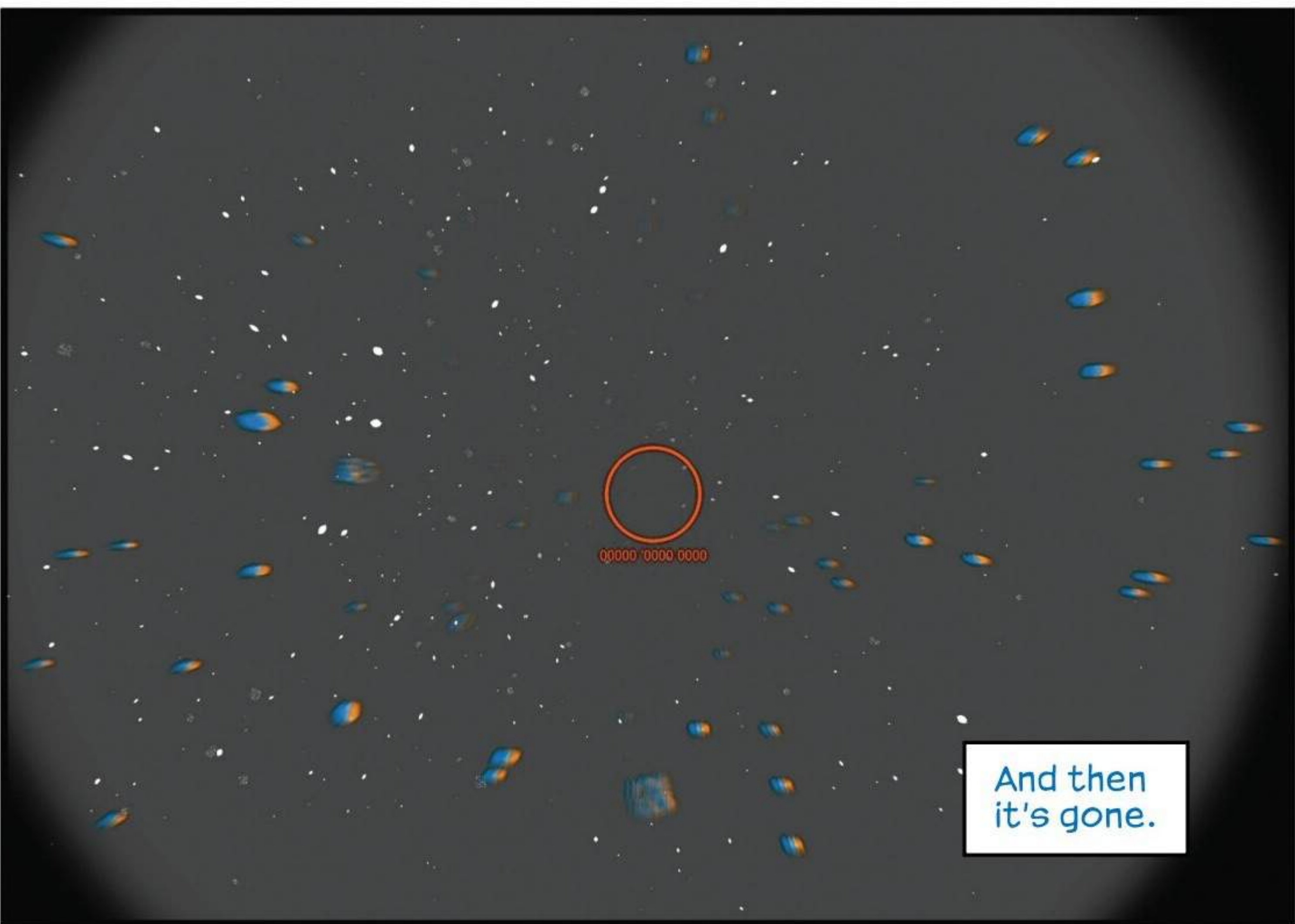
It came from a dying *star*--one dimmer than the rest and getting dimmer still.



FFT 024 & FF 000

Galaxy 0034835n 9345n 34952 934598 8354 mm

240x FOV 17'



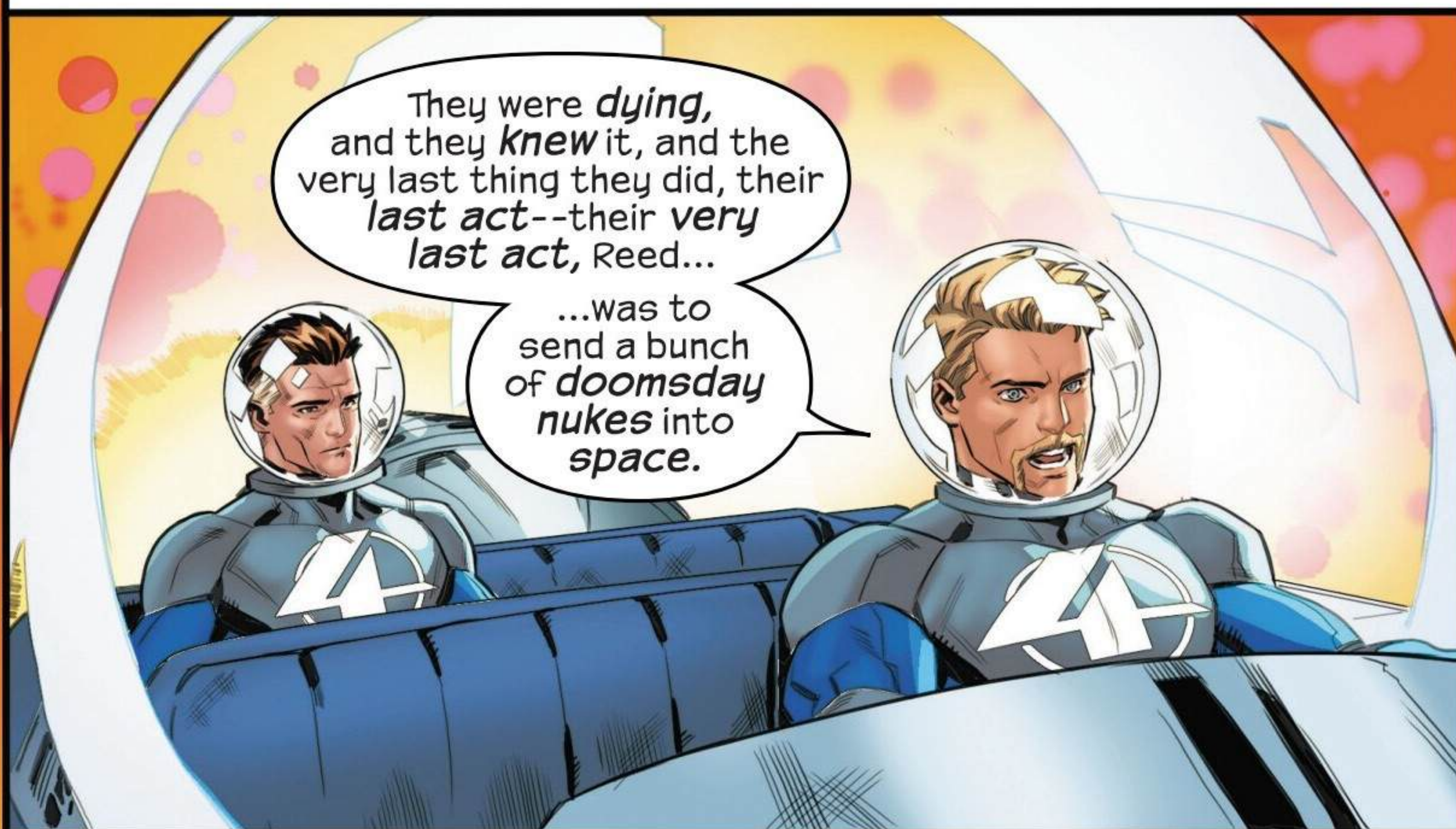
And then it's gone.

Reed's Research Log, postscript.

It's been days since our encounter with Zrixa, but one final particle has just been detected. Sue funneled it to the lab, and Johnny and I have shrunk down to meet it.

Not knowing what it could *contain*, we have to be *careful*...

I'm sorry, Reed, I just-- I keep thinking about what happened, you know? About Zrixa's world.



They were *dying*, and they *knew* it, and the very last thing they did, their *last act*--their very *last act*, Reed...

...was to send a bunch of *doomsday nukes* into space.



...That's dark, right? To hate someone *so* much that you don't care who it hurts, even if it takes a *billion years*...

I dunno, man. I think it might be messing me up.

As we make our way to the particle-ship, I do my best to answer Johnny's question.

I tell him what I know of hate--of how it can help you to be your worst self. I paraphrase *Davičo* and tell him it's a reflex, a defense. I tell him it's powerful.



But I also speak to him of love.

I tell him that though Zrixa's world was an *enigma*, I expect it was, in many ways, not unlike our own.

A world of competing *ideas* and competing *philosophies*.



Perhaps in the midst of all that bleakness, there were still those who believed things could be better, who believed they still had options beyond *revenge*.



I am thrilled to discover my supposition is *not* without evidence.

For inside the final
proton-ship, we
don't find illness
and death.

Instead, we find the last
daughter of an ancient
world, the sole survivor
of a planet that froze
solid eons before our
sun had even *formed*.

And Johnny Storm tells
her, in a language she's
never heard, that there
are so many on our
world who will *love* her.
Who will *adopt* her.

She's alive.
Against cosmic,
astronomical
odds, she's alive.

We find
hope.





They call themselves the "Fantastic Four."*

LATVERIA.

*Translated from KKKKKKKK.

They're "human": beings built around internal supports they call a "skeleton," itself radiating out of a long, hard central tube they call a "spine."

I have no idea where Doom would even get the *metal* for that! A dome big enough to cover his whole *country*?

I don't believe he *could*. I believe this dome is *magical*.

Which, as we feared, means it's magically resisting my *powers*. I can't turn it invisible.

So there's no sayin' what Doom's *up ta* in there.

And they call their planet "Earth."

It is a world not my own.

You were right ta want ta *investigate*, Reed. With Doom becomin' *Sorcerer Supreme* and now lockin' himself an' his people away from th' world... talk about *revoltin' developments*.*

Well, even *magic's* gotta *melt*, right? *Flame on!*

FWOOMPH
FWOOMPH
FWOOMPH
FWOOMPH

*It happened in BLOOD HUNT #5. --Tom

PLAANG!

So the odds of me ever encountering a being from this "Earth" were, to put it mildly, *astronomically* small. It should never have happened.

And yet it did.

This is my story, and it's a love story. It's the story of a woman who fell in love with an *alien*...

ARGGGH!

...and of the thrilling, funny, romantic, *fiery* alien who loved her back.

THE
FANTASTIC
FOUR IN:

"STAR-CROSSED"



Well, kids, we ain't in *Kansas* anymore, that's fer darn sure. Or, you know-- *Latveria*.

I just touched the dome, and then--**BAM!** Some sort of *portal* Doom set up, a security system maybe?

I think so. I felt some *very* strange EM radiation when you did.

This *vegetation* is *remarkable*. Photosynthetic, clearly, but without *cyanobacteria*. And absorbing the energy-rich green/yellow area of the spectrum is more efficient than *reflecting* it...

That's the first thing that strikes ya, bud-- the fact they got purple plants here?



No, the first thing that struck me was the *gravity*--it's *below* Earth normal. If it were sunny, Eratosthenes' method would let me calculate this world's circumference and conclude whether it's *smaller* or just *less dense*.

But either way, Ben, you're right: We aren't in Kansas anymore. We aren't even in our *solar system*.

I believe Johnny is correct: Victor *magically protected* his dome, and part of those protections was to *transport* anyone who interfered with it to-- *someplace else*.

So we're lost on an alien world, with no way back to Earth. *Again*.

And that means we should start either *finding* a way home or *making* one. C'mon.

Let's get to it.

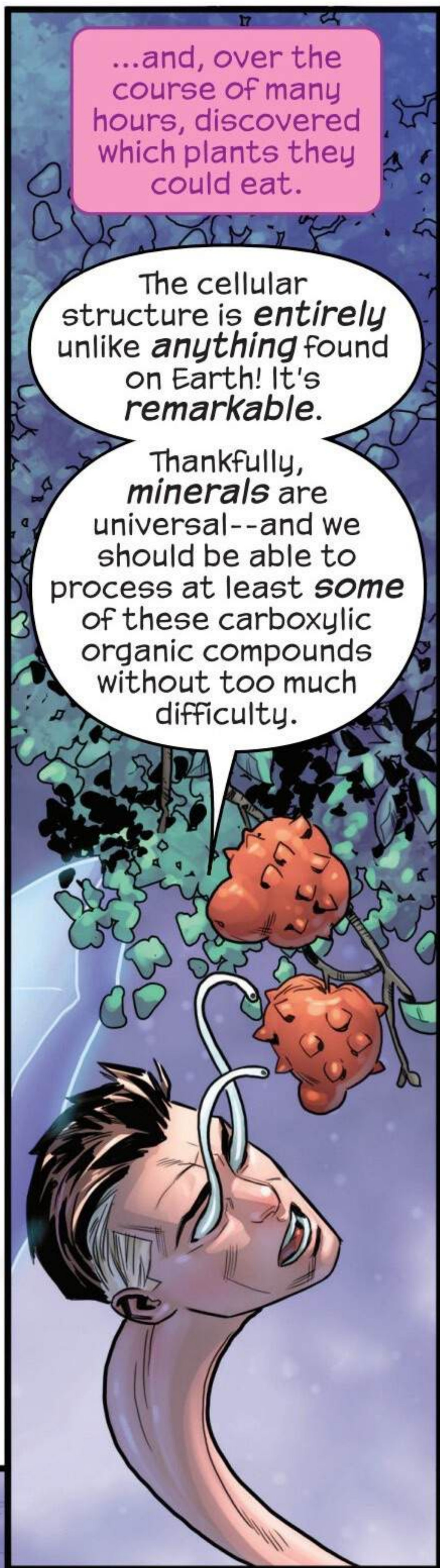




The four aliens explored our world-- finding ways to drink our *water*...

Boil it, Johnny. Can't be too safe.

Already on it, Sis!



...and, over the course of many hours, discovered which plants they could eat.

The cellular structure is *entirely* unlike *anything* found on Earth! It's *remarkable*.

Thankfully, *minerals* are universal--and we should be able to process at least *some* of these carboxylic organic compounds without too much difficulty.



They even encountered some of the large fauna that live in our *wilderness*.

KKKKKKKKKKKK
KKKKKKKKKK

Whoa!

Fascinating.



And, thankfully, managed to *survive* it.

Yeah, well, ya can study it, Big Brain, when it's *not* trying ta eat us!

KONK!

I look forward to it, old friend.



And then, days after their arrival...

Anything?

Actually, yeah! Um--

--I think it's a *city*?

...they finally found *us*.

I was assigned to be the *liaison* for the youngest of the aliens, he who emerged from the gale with a name to match:

Johnny of the Storm.

I gotta admit, I'm *impressed* with-- all of this. Your whole world.

How so?

It's just-- if a bunch of crazy aliens like us showed up on *our* world--especially in, like, *old-timey* times, I'm pretty sure we wouldn't've been as welcoming as *you* have.

Honestly, we probably would've tried to burn 'em as *witches*.

Ah. So you humans fear outsiders.

No--not *all* of us, and not all the time. But you *never* do, do you? It's honestly really inspiring.

Here, all of us travel repeatedly throughout our lives. Our world is one giant continent, so all of us know that *we* will one day be the strangers too.

Thus, we greet them as we would greet ourselves.

I love that. Your world--what do you call it again?

KKKKKK. It means "soil."

Not that far from mine--Earth. It means...

Uh... soil too, I guess?

Haha, I never realized what a *super-boring* name we gave our planet until just now.



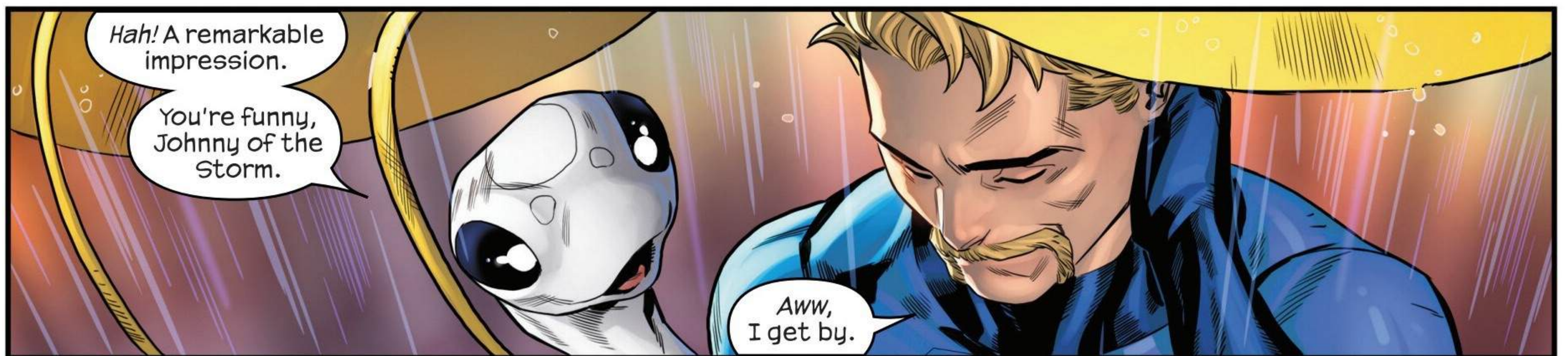
Anyway, we're not here for long: a few months, tops. Reed's certain that with your technology level, he can build a *rocket ship* to get us home.

And this despite the fact that our world is not as advanced as yours?



Hey, ours has more *inventions*, sure, but I'm not so certain that means we're more *advanced*. But, yeah, if *anyone* can do it, it's him.

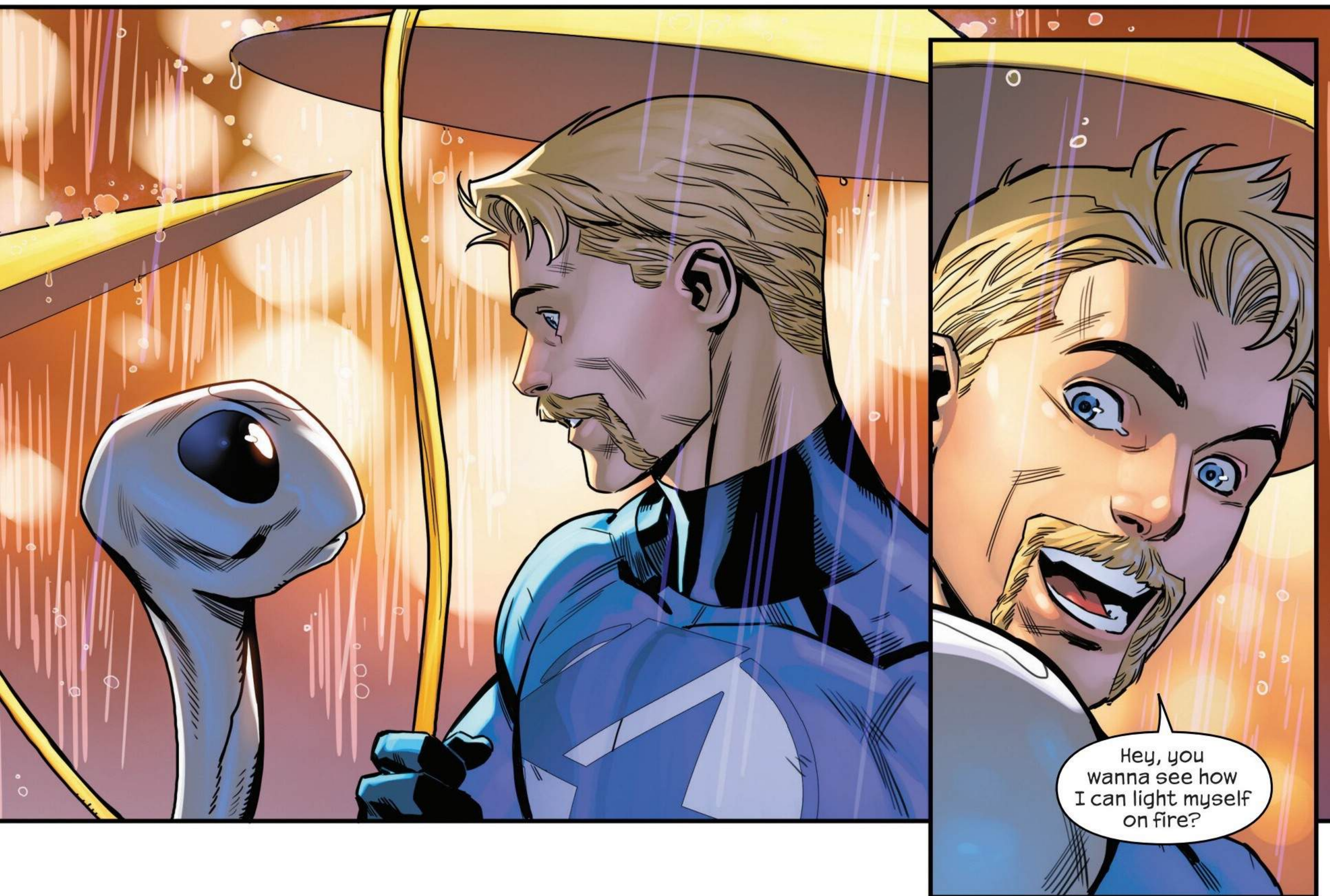
He's all, "As you know, Jonathan, both molecular structures and the laws of physics are *universal*, thus, the atomic compounds and processes required to produce them thankfully remain a known quantity."



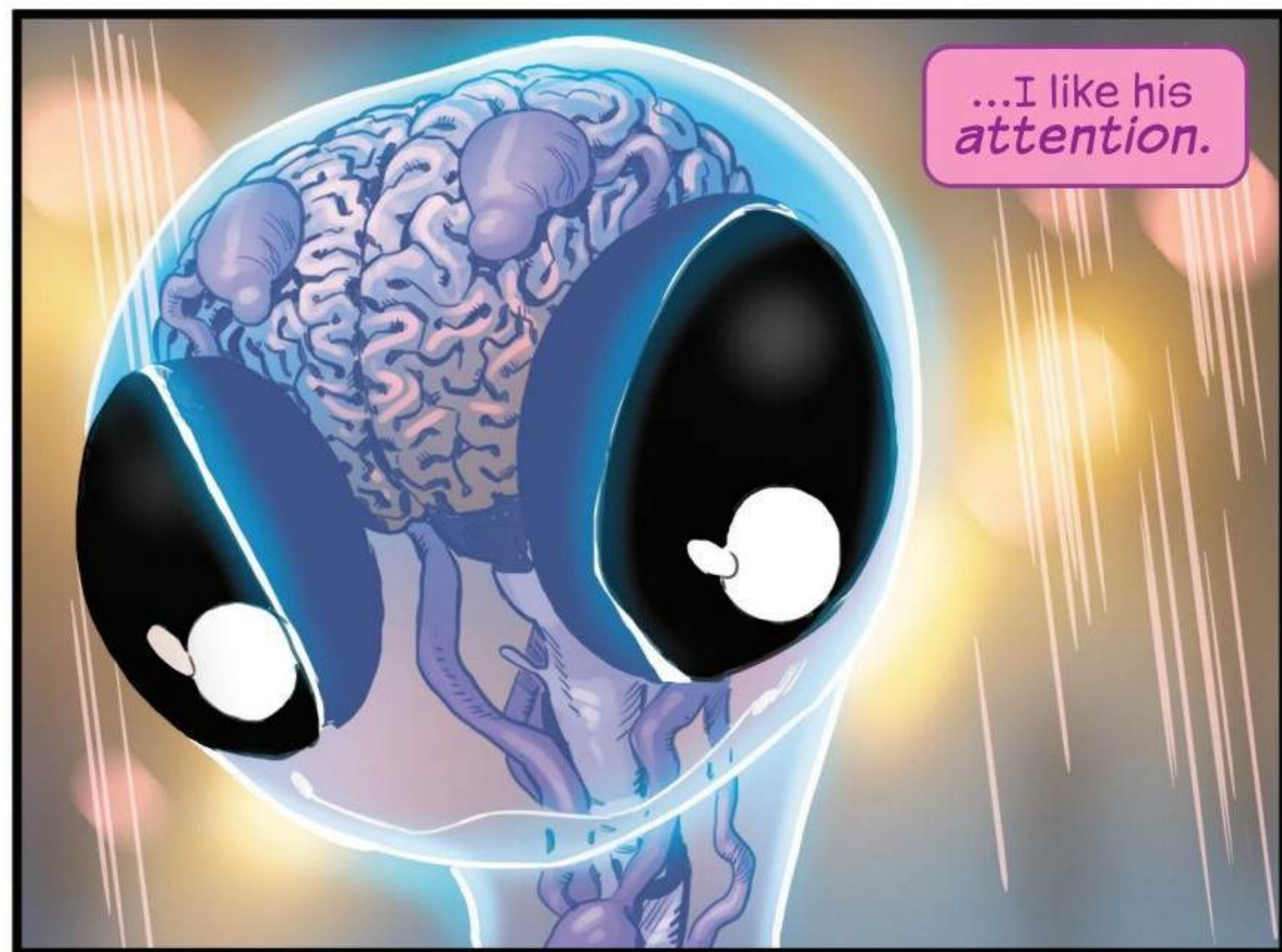
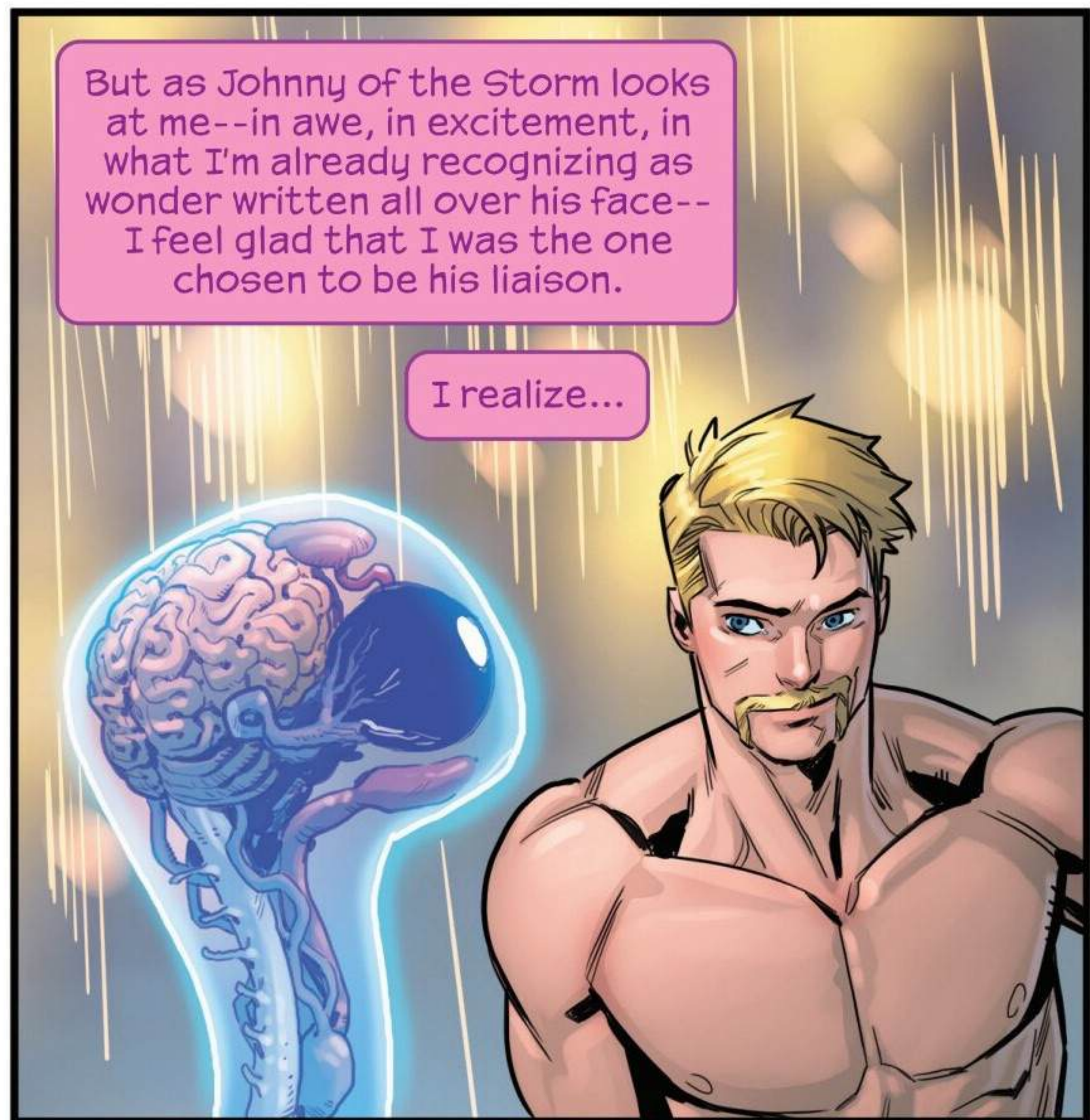
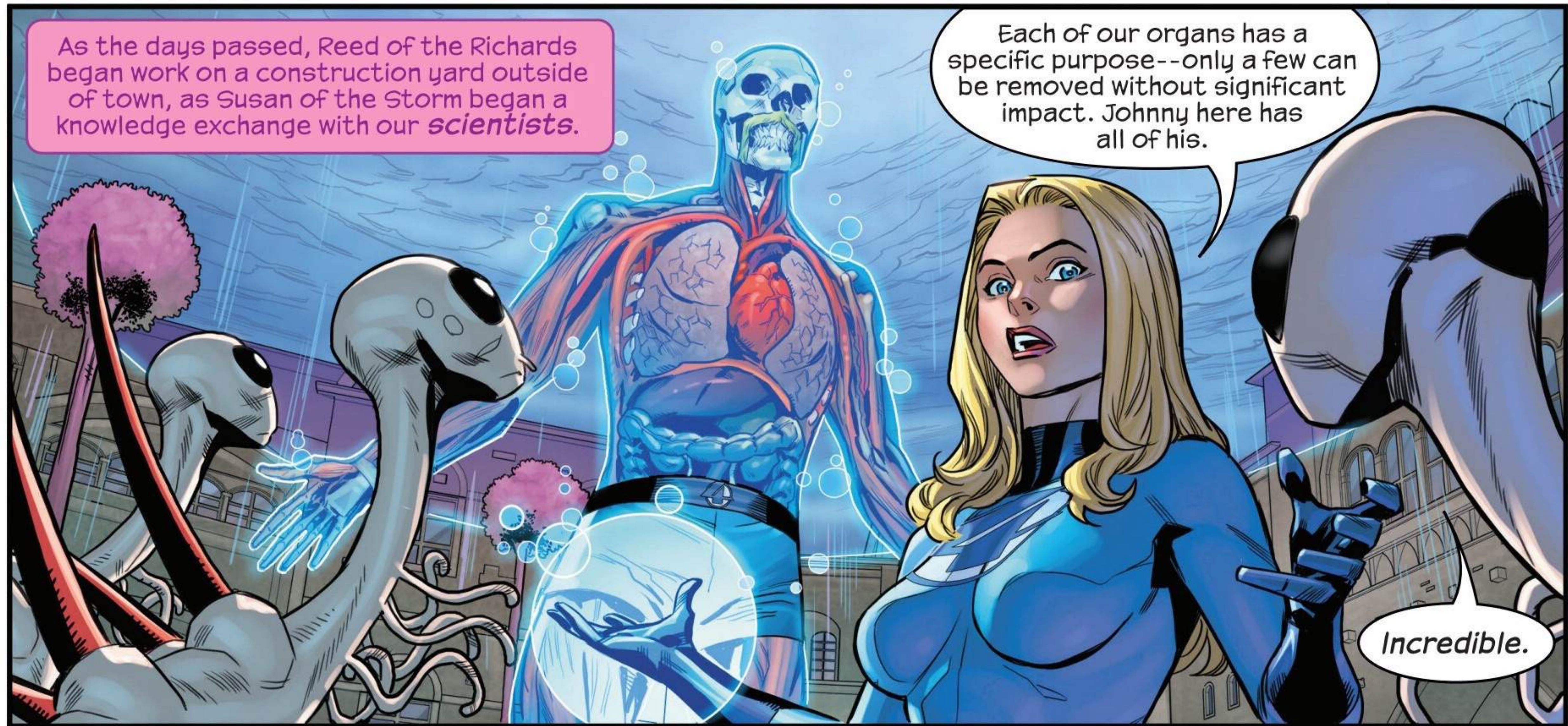
Hah! A remarkable impression.

You're funny, Johnny of the Storm.

Aww, I get by.



Hey, you wanna see how I can light myself on fire?



So one evening,
when there was a rare
break in the rain,
I invited him to come
cloud-watching with me.

I don't think
I'll ever get used
to how *quick* your
days are. Thirteen
hours! That's
so fast!

How long
are they on
Earth?

Twenty-
four.

Twenty-
four?! You stay
awake for *twelve*
hours? Every
day?

Actually...
more like
sixteen.

How are
you not
exhausted *all*
the time?

I think we
just evolved for it,
y'know? And our seasons
are different too. From
what I understand from
your elders, yours
are a *lot* wilder.

Our rainy
season lasts
for kkkkkkkkkkkk,
but when it ends,
the stars come out,
and they're
beautiful.

Sorry, the
translator
didn't catch
that. The rainy
season lasts
how long?

Oh. Uh...
many, many weeks?
A third of the
year.

Oh, *months*.
It lasts for
months.

What's
a month?

It's like 1/12th
of the year on my
world. Um, I think
they're based on
moon cycles,
somehow?

Then that
explains why we
don't have a word
for it. kkkkkk has
no moon.

Well, that's
too bad,
Angelica of the
Shore.

Because
on Earth,
there's *nothing*
more romantic than
talking a walk by
moonlight.





I mean--I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thinking of asking you the same thing, but, uh...

How do you...? I mean, how do we...?



Come. You're an explorer.



I'm sure you'll figure it out.



Oh, Johnny...!

And as the days turned to weeks, Johnny and I became closer and closer.

He taught me what he knew of engines--their craftsmanship and power, the way they turn *intent* into *action*.



And together, we helped the Fantastic Four build their *spaceship*.



We were falling in love, and it was easy.

Even knowing he was going to *leave*, even knowing every day how much more that would *hurt*...



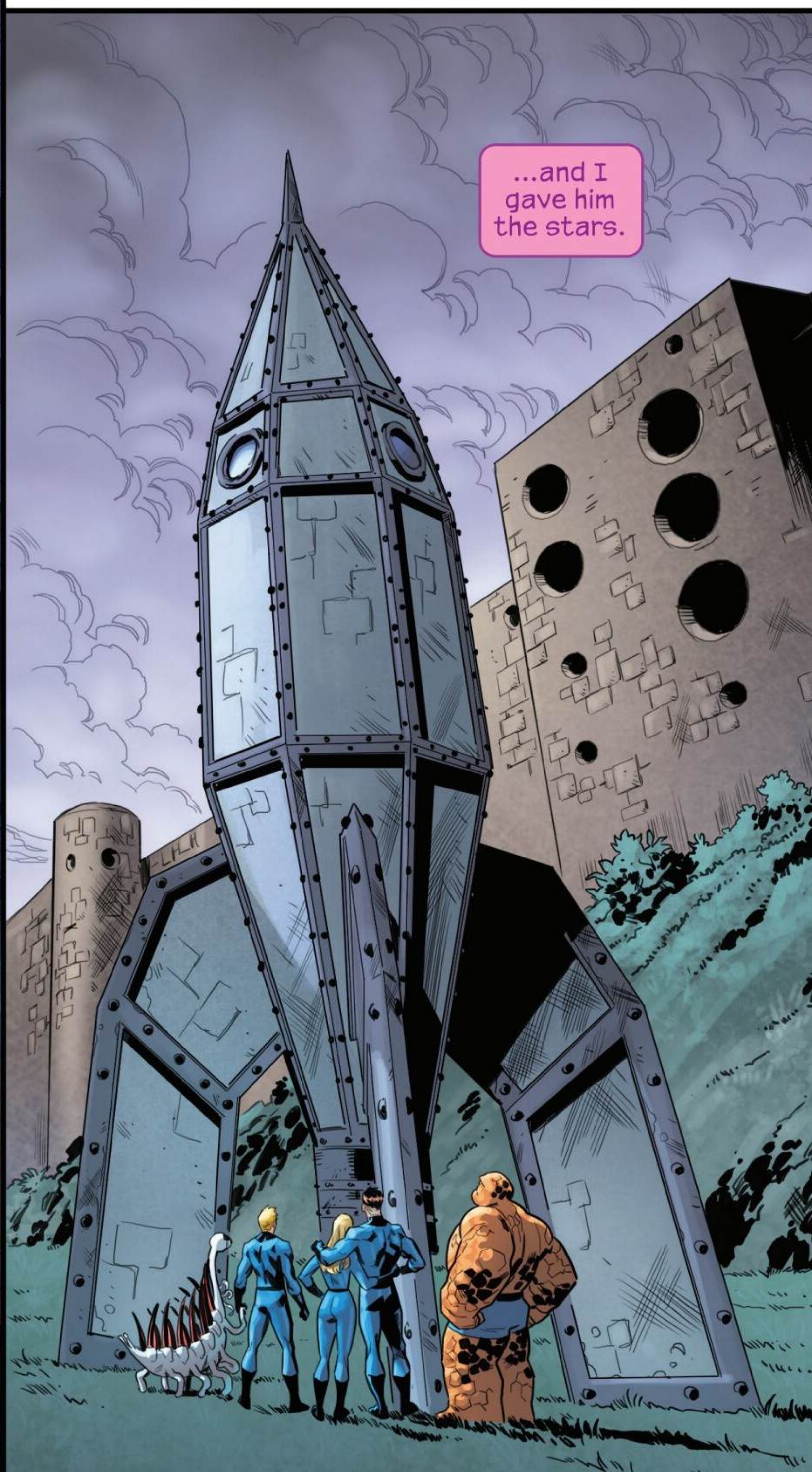
...it was so *easy*. How could it not be?



He gave me the moon...



...and I gave him the stars.



And then it was time:
Work on the rocket finished
just as the cloudy season
was ending.

All that was left was to
plot the sky, so they'd
know where to *aim* it.

There!
The first star of
the season!

And if
you'll avert your
eyes, everyone, it's
traditional on KKKKKK
to *kiss* if you spot it.
For *luck*.

Fer the luvva--
can ya not hold off on
th' *smoochin'* for *two*
minutes? Some of us
are tryin' ta do
science here.

I really
could've carried
you above the cloud
line for observations
well before now,
darling.

There was no
point until the rocket
was ready, and besides,
you yourself wanted to
experience this world as
those indigenous
to it do.

In any case, there's
now ample data for
me to--

--to...

No.

No, there's--I've
made some *mistake*.
It can't--it doesn't
make *sense*.

Honey?

The *stars*,
darling! Position, radius,
luminosity--all of it! They're
exactly what I remember!

That's good,
ain't it?

I mean--
it sounds good
to *me*.

No, it's *not*. It's
impossible--but
it's *true*, which
means--

Reed,
please--*tell*
us what you're
thinking! Let us
help!

The universe is complex, ever-changing-- which means the only way *this* view of the cosmos could be *identical* to the one I remember is if we were observing it in the same *spot*, at the same *time*.

Ben, Johnny, Sue...there's only one conclusion. We're *already* home. We haven't gone *anywhere*.

This is *Earth*.



No no no no no no, wait, *hold on*-- we haven't *Planet of the Apes*ed ourselves here. You said it yourself-- KKKKKK's *smaller*! It only has one continent!

Evolution went *completely* differently-- we don't even have the same cellular structure, right? It's a different *world*!



Hell, there's not even a *moon*! How can this be *Earth* if--?

Dear God, of *course*. That's it. That's what explains all of this, Johnny!

Theia.

This is Earth without *Theia*.





"Early in its development, the solar system had more planets than it does today. *Theia* was one of them, a Mars-sized world *sharing* our orbit.

"And 4.5 billion years ago, before life had even begun evolving here, *Theia* *smashed* into *Earth*.

"The impact was--*beyond* apocalyptic. The force of the impact ejected *mantle* into *orbit*. The cores of the two worlds *merged*.

"Some of that molten rock fell back, and some of it became our moon.

"This cataclysm changed Earth's *size*. It changed its *tilt*, its *spin*, its *orbit*, its *core*--it produced a new world, *different* than the two that *formed* it.

"And that impact never *happened* here.

"Somehow, *someone's* gone back and *prevented* that impact, rewriting the entire history of the world--

"--and erasing all life--uncountable *nonillions*--from *existence*."



We have to go back. I can turn our spaceship into a *timeship*--it'll take some doing, but I *can* do it.

But *should* we? If Theia hits Earth, then we live. And if it doesn't, *this* world lives instead.

No matter what we choose, we're dooming *another* version of Earth to *nonexistence*.



Um, you're talking about deciding who lives and dies on what I'm *pretty* sure is the *biggest* possible scale. Can we--

...I'm not sure we should be *doing* that?



You can do this? Prevent all of us from ever being hatched? Me, my parents, their parents--all the way back, all of us would *die*?

No. We wouldn't. We *couldn't*. Right, Sue? Tell her!



Look, all we have right now is a *theory*. Hell, I don't even see how you could *stop* Theia from hitting Earth. We need to know *what happened*.

Reed-- make the changes. We go back and we *observe*, nothing more.



In the meantime, we'll take this to the community here. We won't make *any* moves without consensus. And I'm including *you* in that, Angelica, and your people.

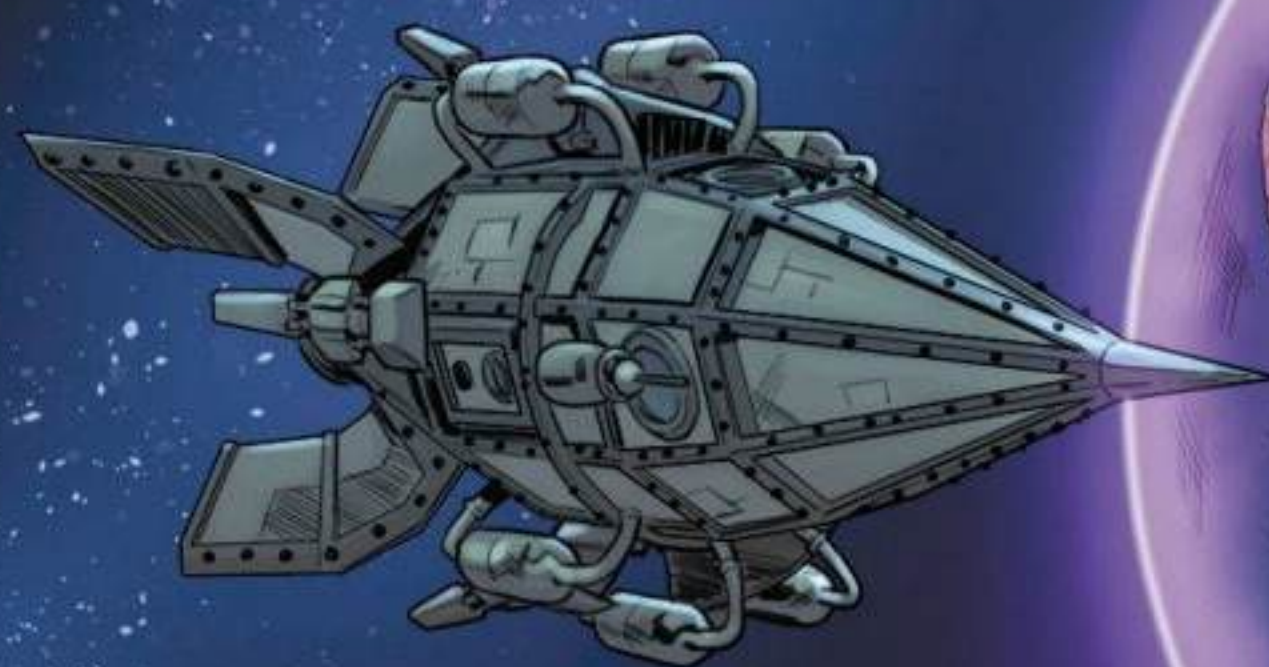
Thank you, Susan of the Storm.

We do this *together*--or we don't do it at all.

The discussion went in circles. How do you decide who lives and dies on this scale? You can't.

But a unanimity emerged: We trusted them. And we had to know more.

And as the one closest to the aliens--the one my people knew they'd *listen* to-- I traveled with them.



I was the first of my people to reach *space*. Susan of the Storm, knowing it was special for me, turned our ship *invisible*.

It's glorious.



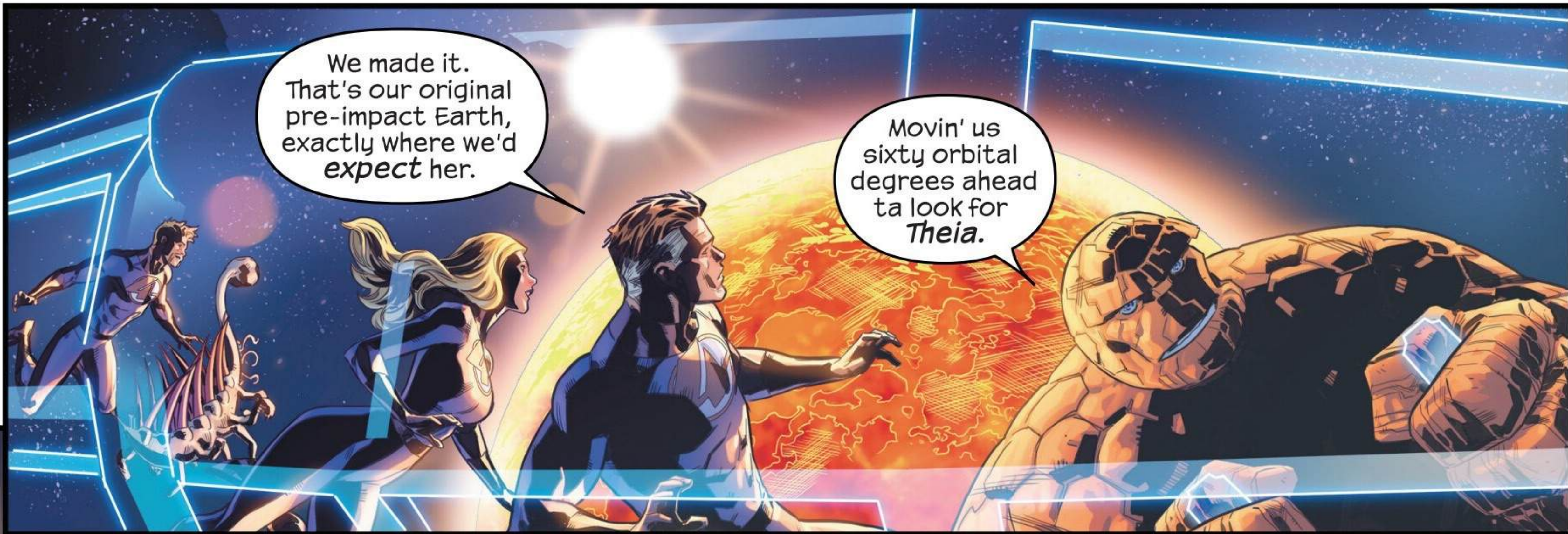
Oh, you ain't seen nothing yet. Reed?

Engaging temporal drive in three, two, one...

...zero.



CHRRROOOOM!

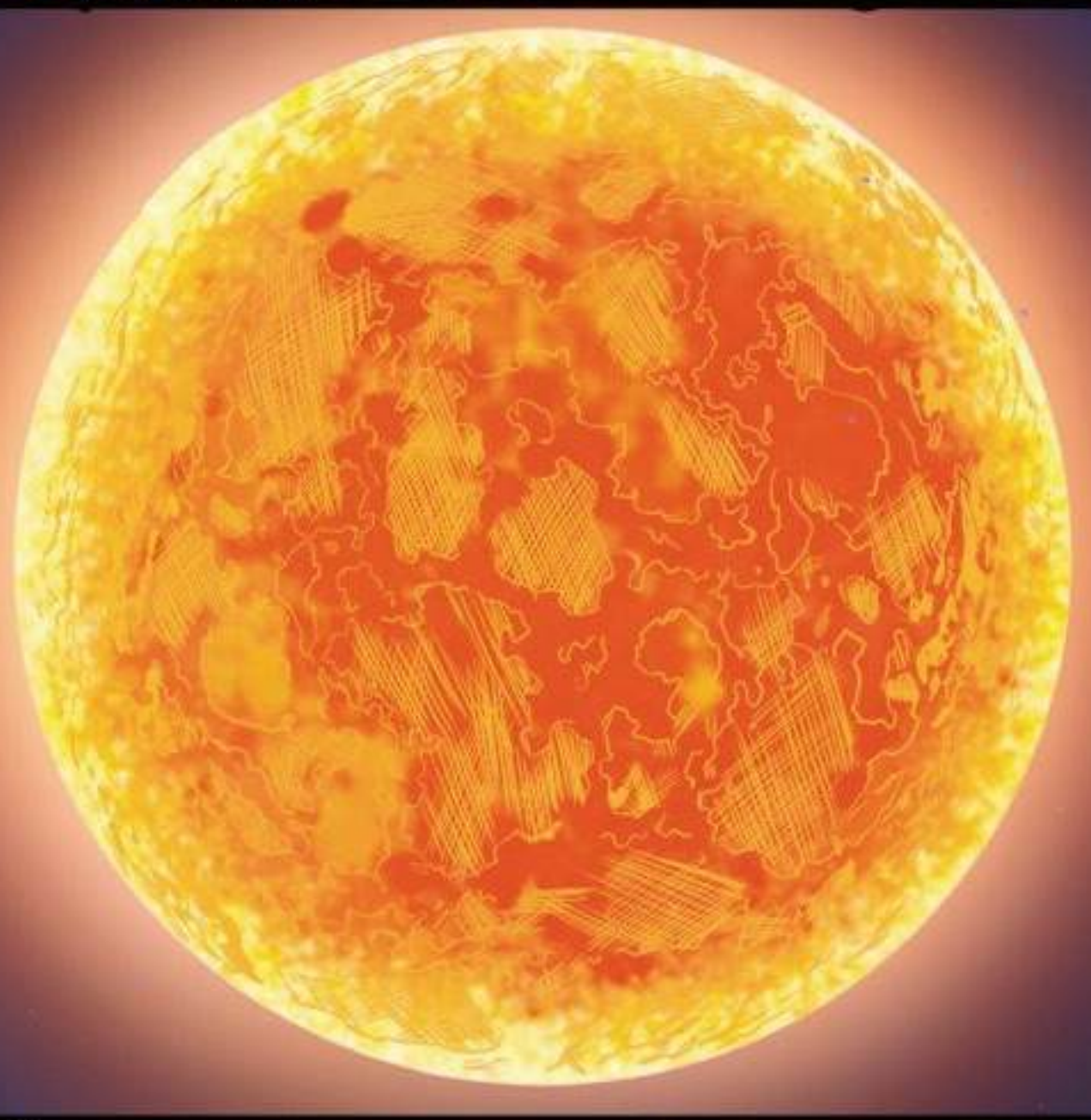


We made it.
That's our original
pre-impact Earth,
exactly where we'd
expect her.

Movin' us
sixty orbital
degrees ahead
ta look for
Theia.

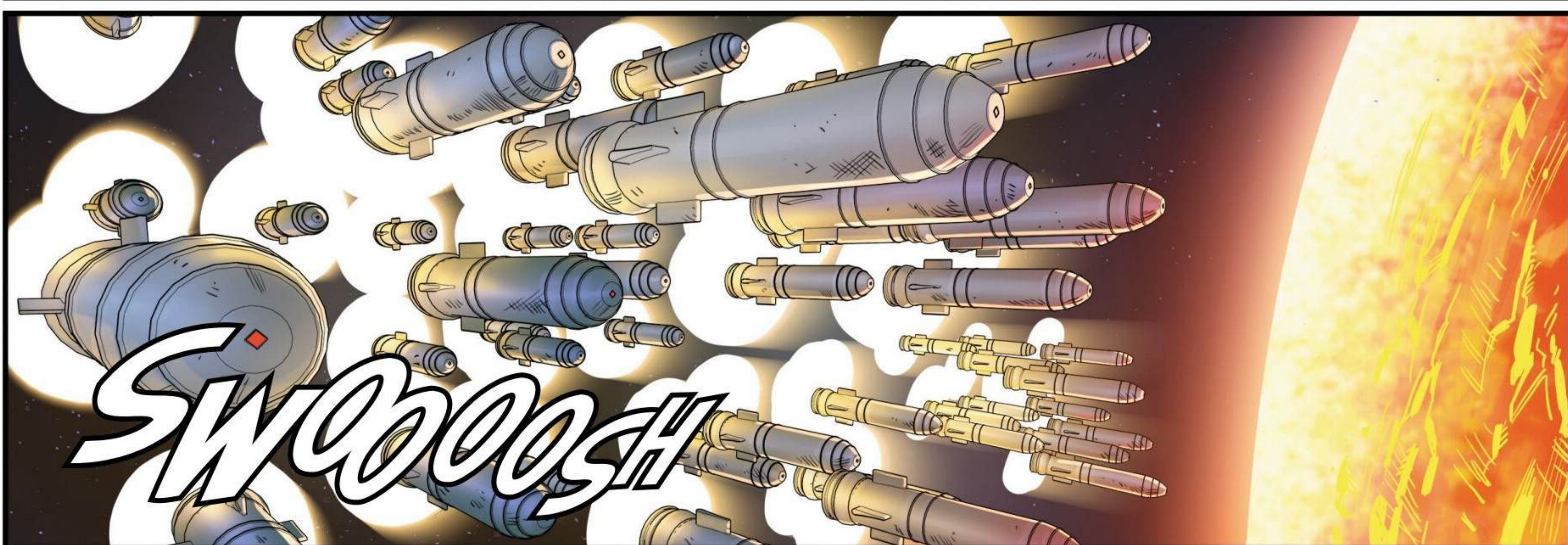
An' *there* she is, ladies n'
germs. Welcome ta Lagrange
point L4...

...an' welcome
ta *Theia*.



Nothing seems to be
exceptional. I brought us to
a moment high in temporal
energy, but--

Wait! I'm sensing
EM radiation similar
to the *portal*...
there!





Those missiles--
they're *nuclear*!

There's got
to be hundreds
of them.
Thousands!

A world's
arsenal...



Not *a* world's--our
world's. Lookit the *flags*
on the bottoms, Stretch.
They're *ours*!

How? And
why would
Earth...?

The dome around Latveria
that sent us here--that's
gotta be involved,
right?



After it sent us here,
it would've *remained*
in our world--where
other things could
impact it too.

At some point after we left,
nukes get launched at
Latveria. And the dome sent
those away, just as it did us--
only to somewhere else.
Here.



It's a credible theory.
The dome could be unstable,
given how Victor is still
exploring, still *learning* his
powers as Sorcerer
Supreme.

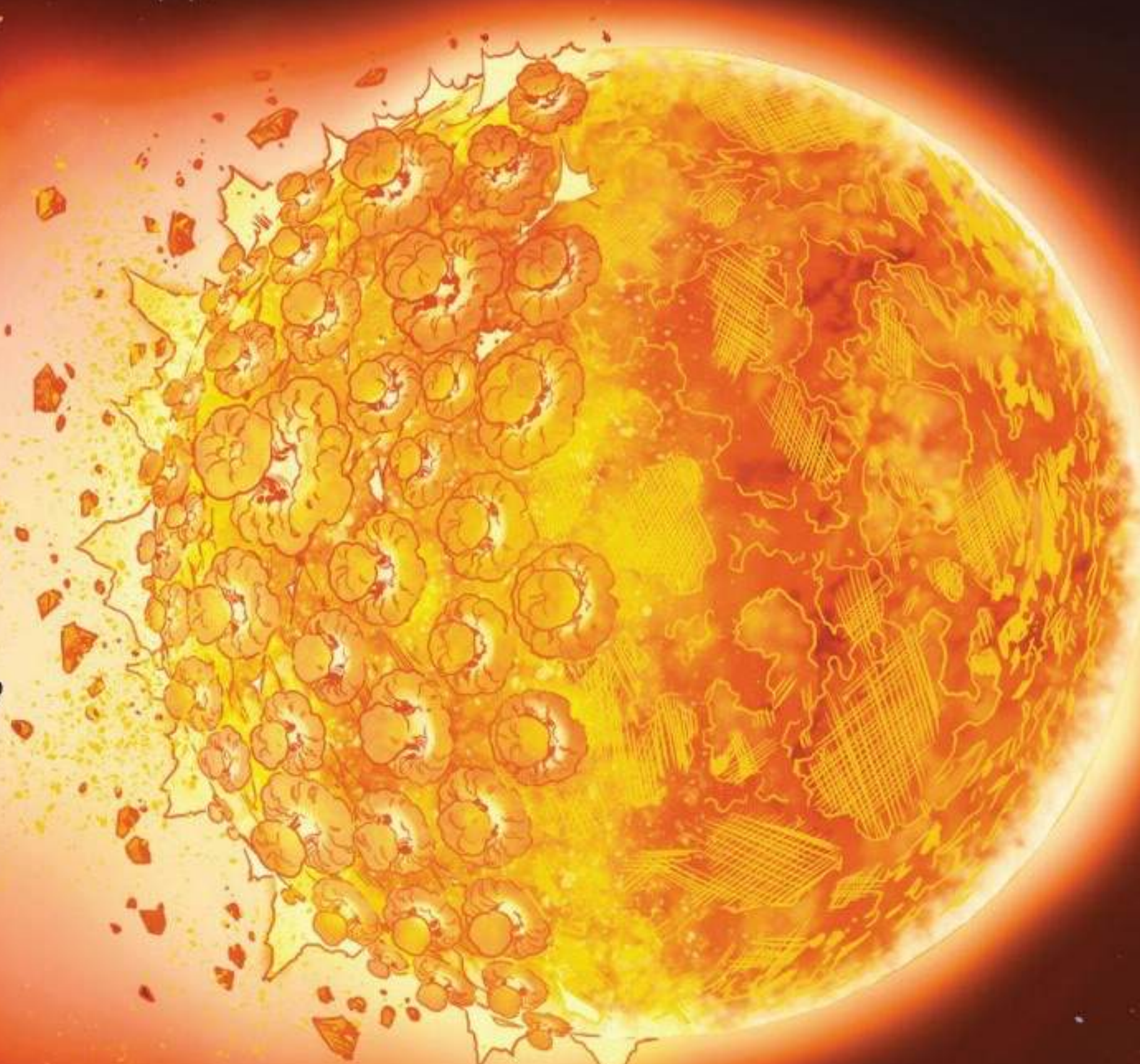
So--*Doom* did
this? That guy killed
th' *whole world*?

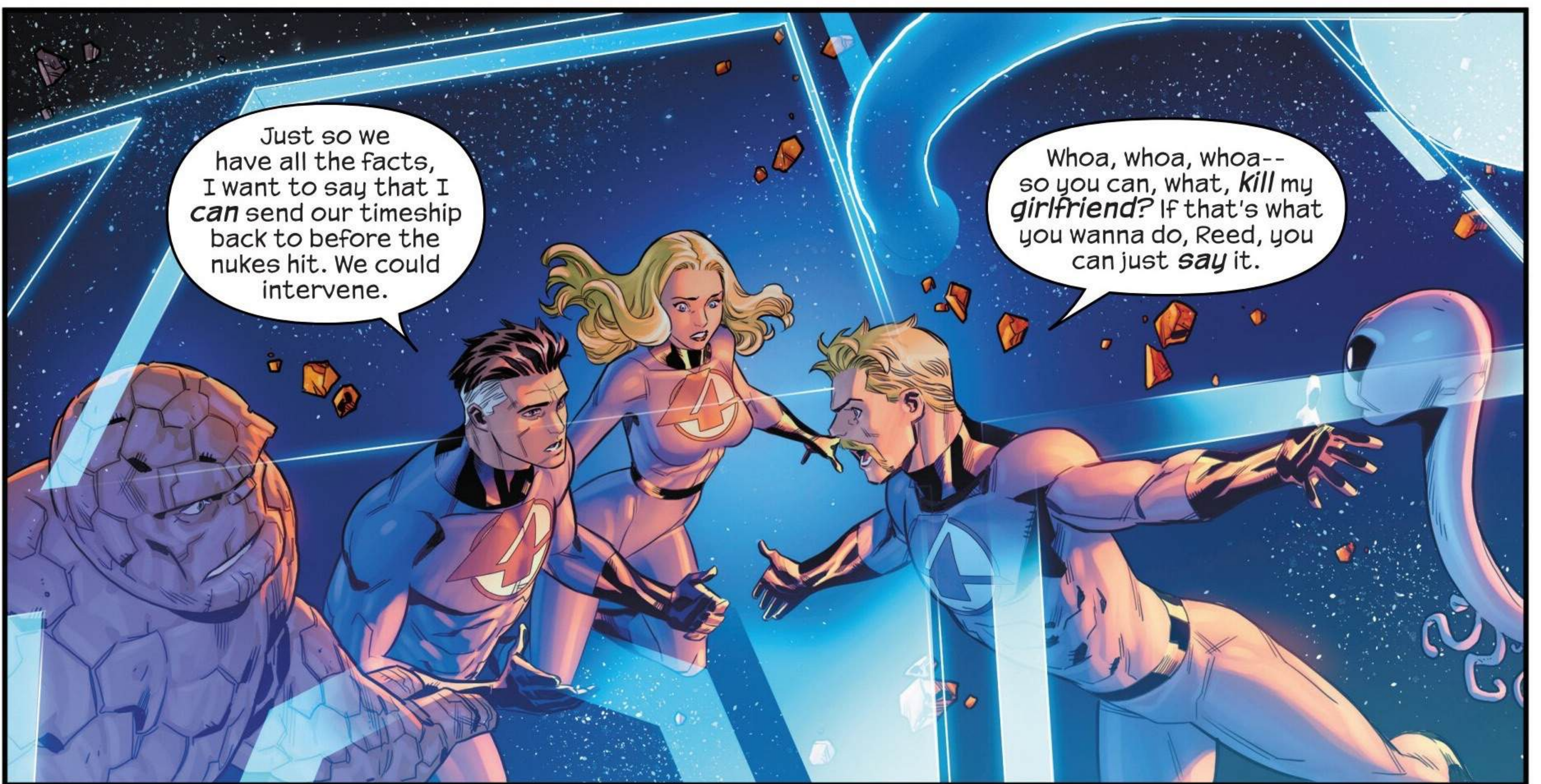
Only by
accident. Victor's ego
is such that he'd never
erase *himself* from
existence.

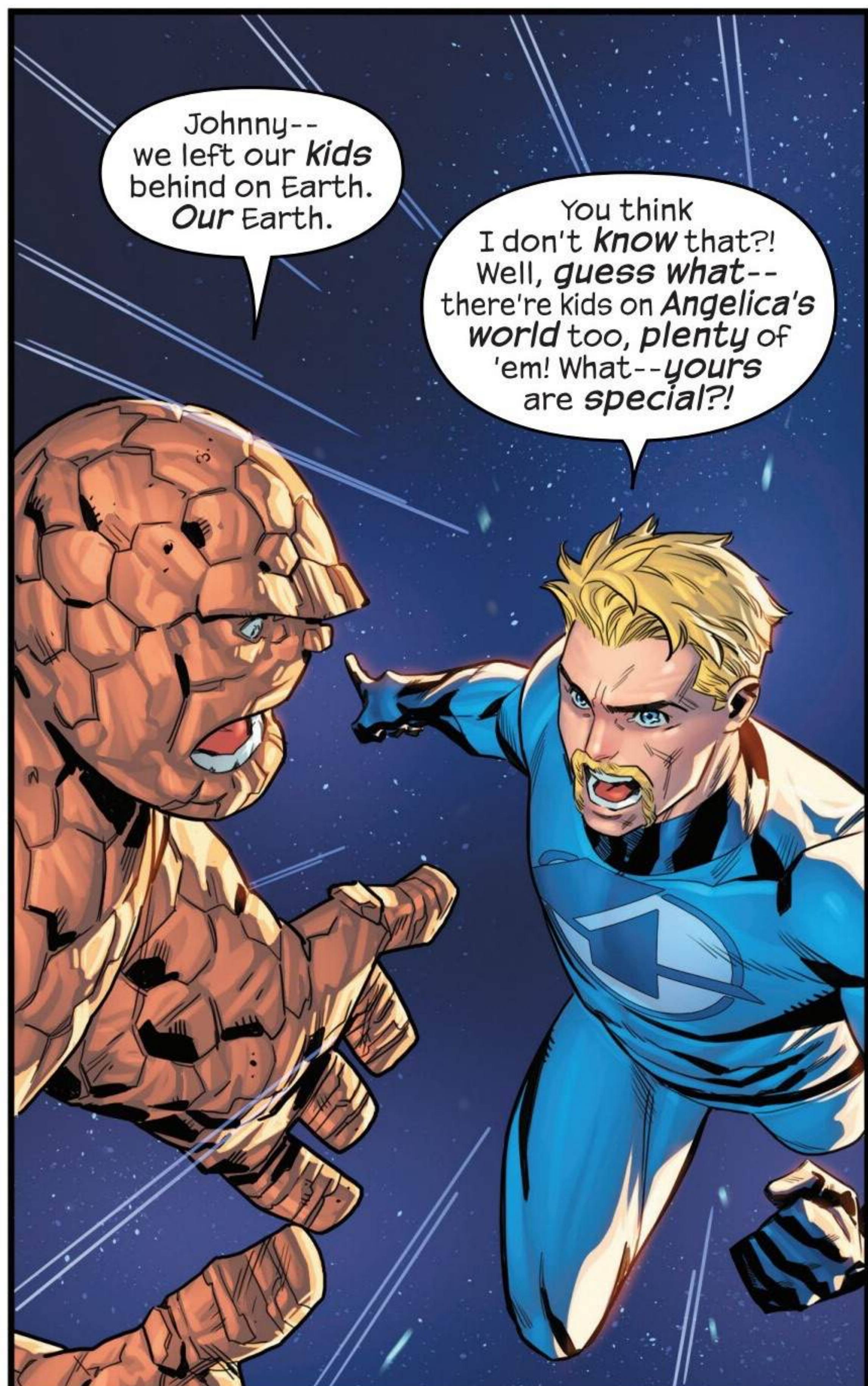
Guys...

...they're
hitting!

**KRAKKKA-
BOOM!**









You don't know what yer *sayin'*, Johnny. So I advise ya ta *shut up* till ya *do*.

Hey!!
Calm down!
We don't need to--



FWOOSH!

YOWCH!



Look, all *anyone* is saying is that this happened by *accident*, and now we have a chance to *intervene*. That's all.

Trillions of humans will die if we don't *fix* it, kid!

And trillions on KKKKKK will die if we do, and they're *just as real*!

We don't get to *decide* things like this!!



We *have* to, Johnny. We can't *ignore* it an' do *nothin'*!

You wouldn't be saying that if you *cared* about this world!

It's a world that never shoulda been!!



Please, everyone-- *calm down*! We can't let *emotion* dictate which option we *choose* here!

You're not gonna *logic* me into accepting *omnicide*, Reed!! There's *no good option* here!

WE DON'T GET TO DO THIS!



You *promised* them that we'd go back and *discuss* things, not *wipe them* from *history*!!

Nobody said we *ain't* gonna *do* that, Flamebrain! We're just *also* discussin' it *now*!

It's an impossible choice.





It should increase the flux within *quantum foam* across multidimensional axes. I propose to send this back in time--to just *before* the nukes hit Theia.

And then...?

And then their *impact* tears not just a hole in early Theia--but across *space-time* too.



The nukes hit, producing Angelica's world. And in a parallel universe, a hair's breadth away, they *don't*--producing *Earth*.

You're going to manually add a new space-time frame to the *Multiverse*.

It will be the first instance of one being created *technologically*, but I believe it's possible.



It'll tie these two potential universes off in a *knot*--well, technically, a Möbius strip. *Both* worlds get to survive. Everybody *lives*.

Reed, that's *perfect*! And then Angelica can still come home with us, right? Or... Wait, do I go with her?

...Hold on, how are we doing this?



This is an *artificial* multiversal creation incident. When it manifests--it'll push us *all* back into our correct universes and time frames.

Okay, so we'll be *separated*, but, hey--we've traveled across the Multiverse before! No big deal, we can come visit! We'll--

Johnny. We *can't*.



Any attempts to introduce one into the other risks the collapse of *both*. Our two worlds--our two universes--must forever remain *fully separated*.

Angelica, Johnny, I'm so sorry...

...but for two Earths to live, your relationship must *die*.



Geez, Reed, ya couldn't find a nicer way ta **break** that to him?

I believed I *was* breaking it nicely. And unambiguously. Did I miss the mark?

Johnny...



Why does it always have to be *me*?!



You all get *love*, you know? You get to have a *family*. But when I *finally* find Angelica, and it's *real*, and I'm not *screwing it all up* for once, I get *this*?

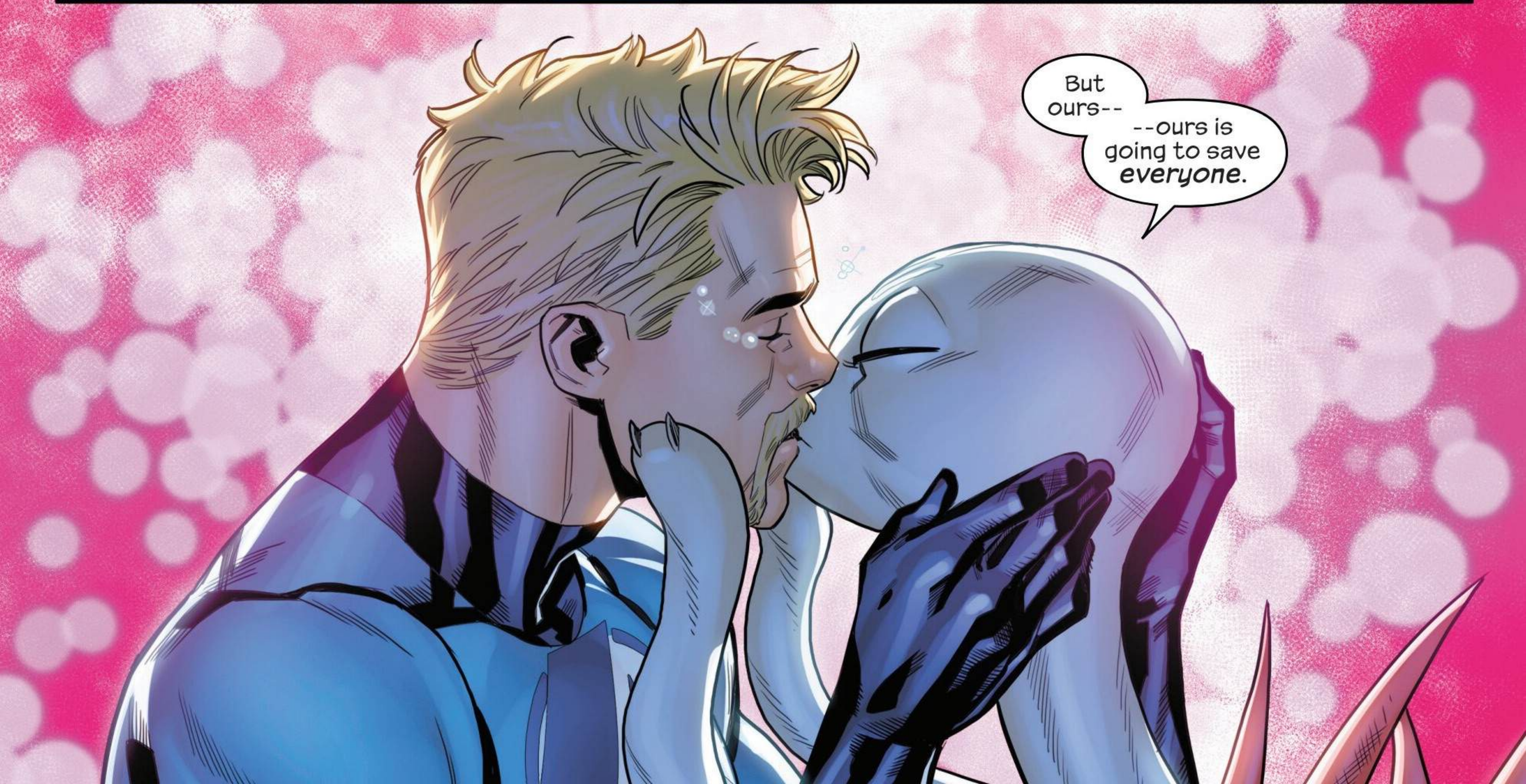
Everyone else gets a *happily ever after*, and I--

Johnny.



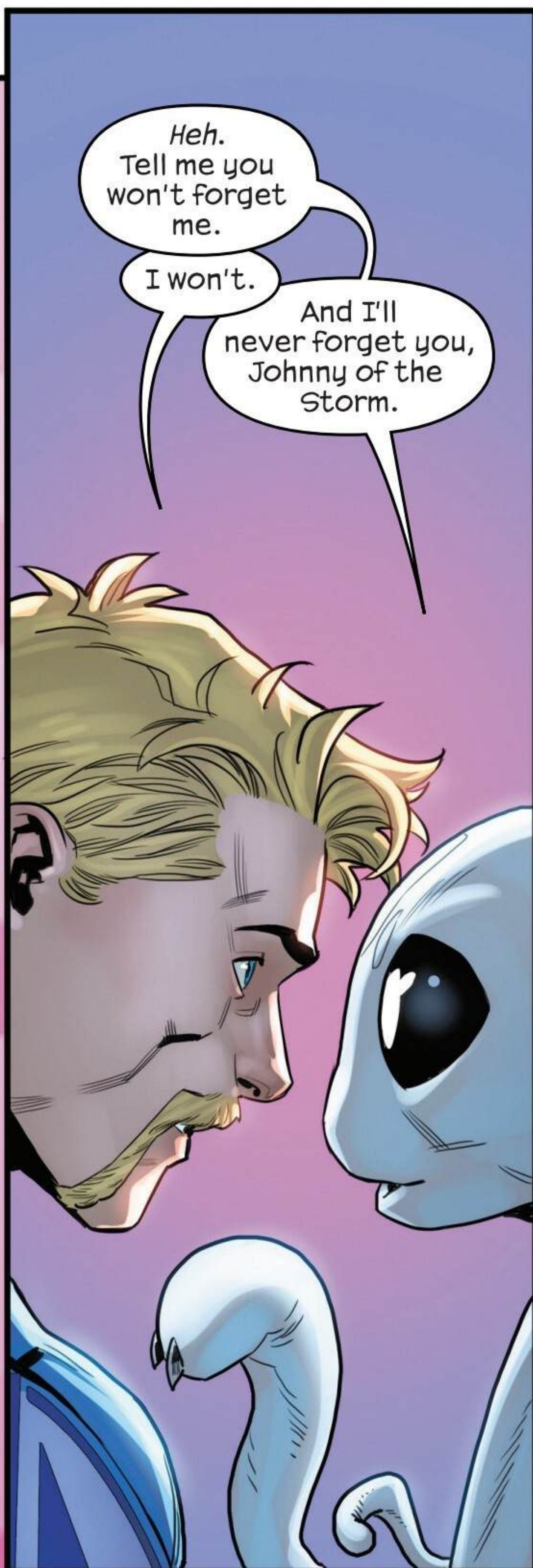
For weeks--for *months*--we *got* our happily ever after. We got to *live* it, Johnny, our impossible love. Don't you see? We *did* it. We get to remember that for the rest of our lives.

Most people's love, most people's relationships--they only save *them*.



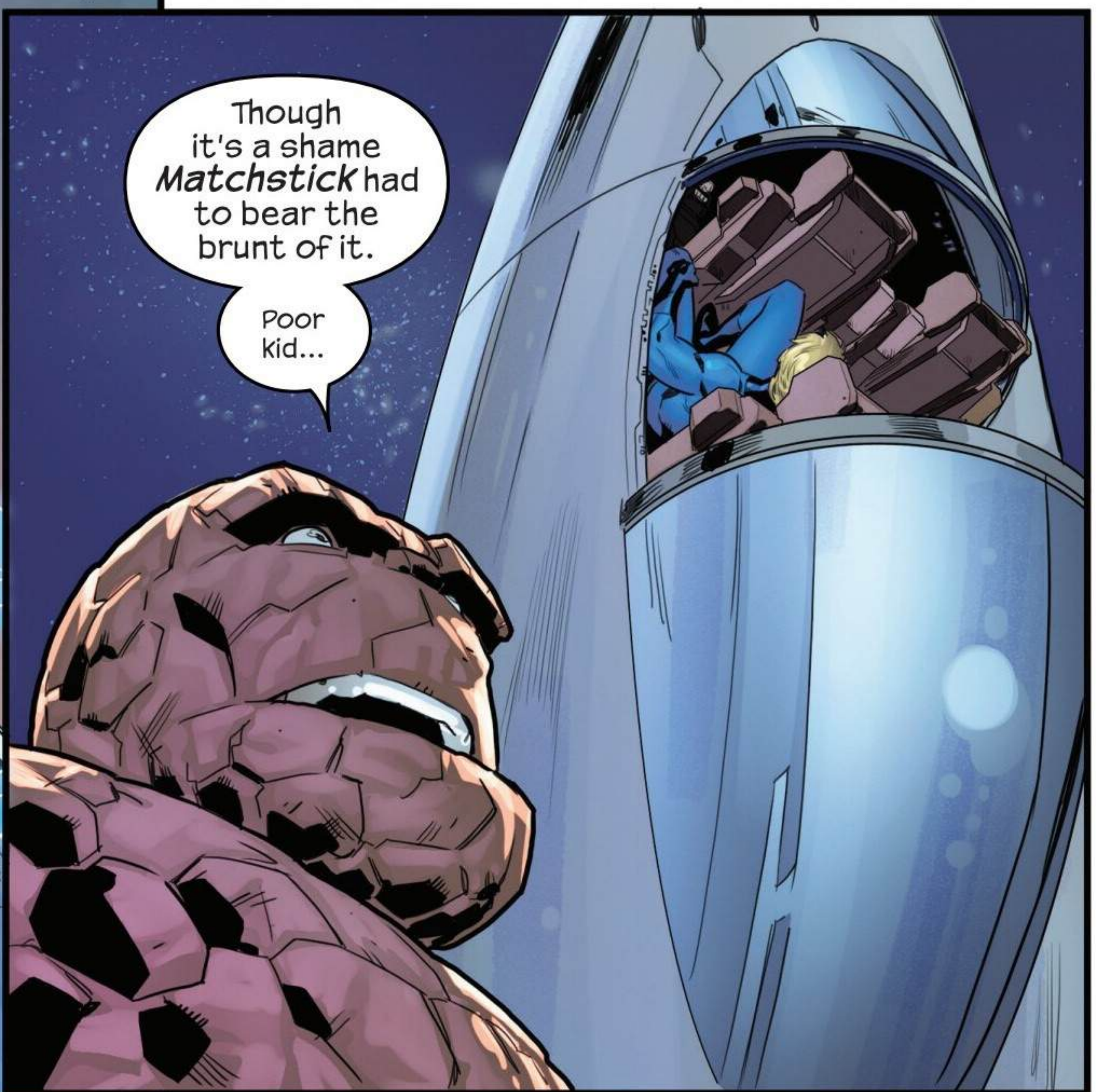
But ours--

--ours is going to save *everyone*.



...and I
give you the
stars.







Lissen, Johnny,
I, uh--I ain't the best
at talkin' about *feelings* n'
whatnot, but, uh, if you
ever wanna--

--that is ta
say, if ya need a,
I don't know, a
shoulder
or, uh...

Naw. I'm--
I'm good, Ben.
Thanks, but...
I'm good.



But...if when we get back to New York
you wanna watch an *incredibly* stupid
movie while drinking adult beverages and
eating an *irresponsible* amount
of chips and chili...



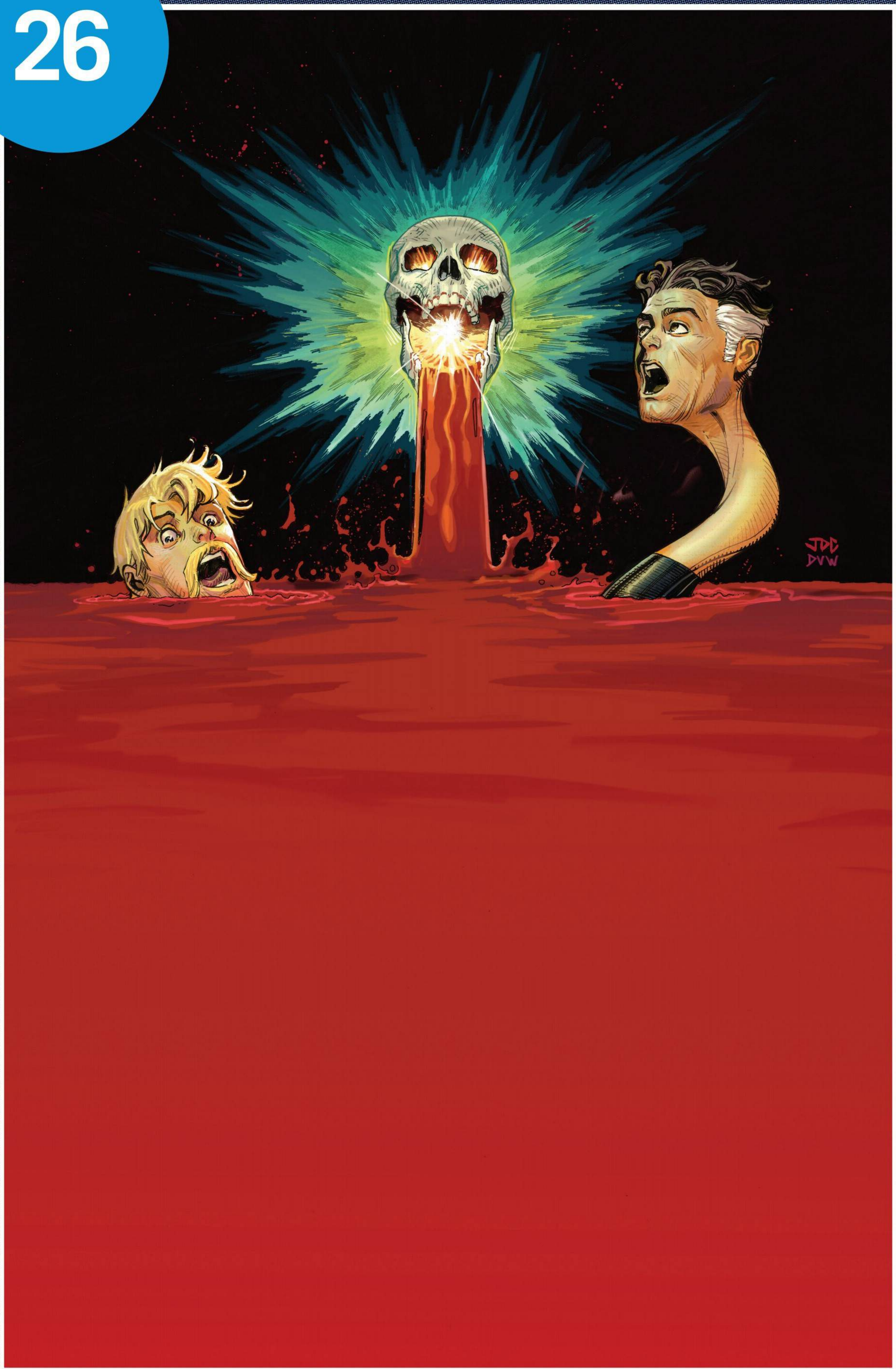
...y'know.

I wouldn't
say no.

Wouldn't
miss it,
Matchstick.









"Look, we all know Reed's *mega* smart, with a good head on his shoulders."

4

"And *Johnny's* got a *great* heart and is always willing to *help*."

"So let's all hold *real tight* to those ideas as we tell you this story, okay?"

"Because I'll admit it: Things *maybe* got a little out of control."

There. This *magic detector* should indicate *where* magic is being used--which will let us *prepare* for Doom if and when he returns.

Glad you found *something* to keep you busy. Turns out, not a *ton* of trick-or-treaters in isolated Arizona farm country, *huh?*

Odd though. I'm getting *very* strong readings below us.

Weird. We got ourselves a magic basement or what?

No, it's not the entire structure. In fact, it seems rather *constrained*.

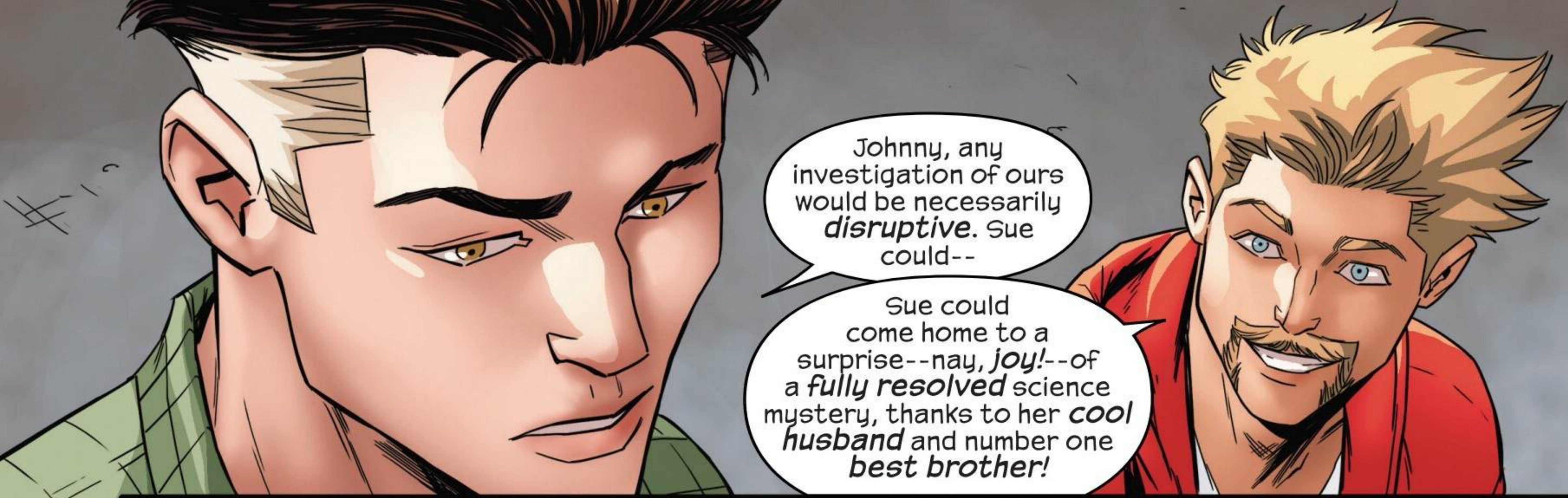
Whatever it is, it's beneath *this* spot, and this spot only. *Hm*.

It's too bad the family's in New York trick-or-treating: Sue could turn this floor *invisible*, and we could easily investigate what's down there.

Well, gee, Mr. Fantastic...

...if only we had some powers of our *own*, then, *huh?*



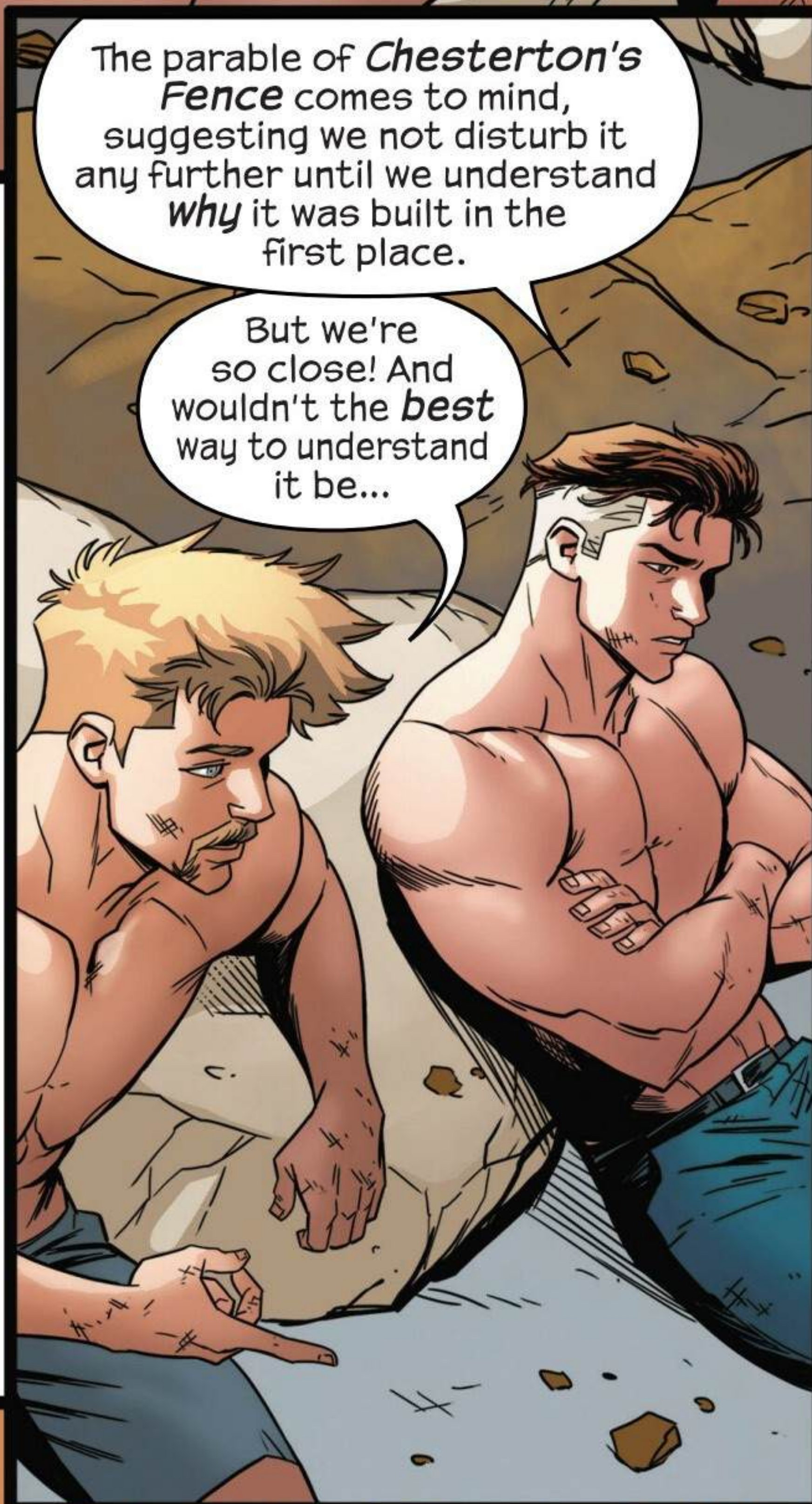






Even so, I wouldn't recommend it. Johnny, these boulders we moved were all **aligned**-- which implies they were placed here with **intentionality**.

The data suggests a **vertical shaft**, built carefully--and then **filled in** with what must have been **great effort**.

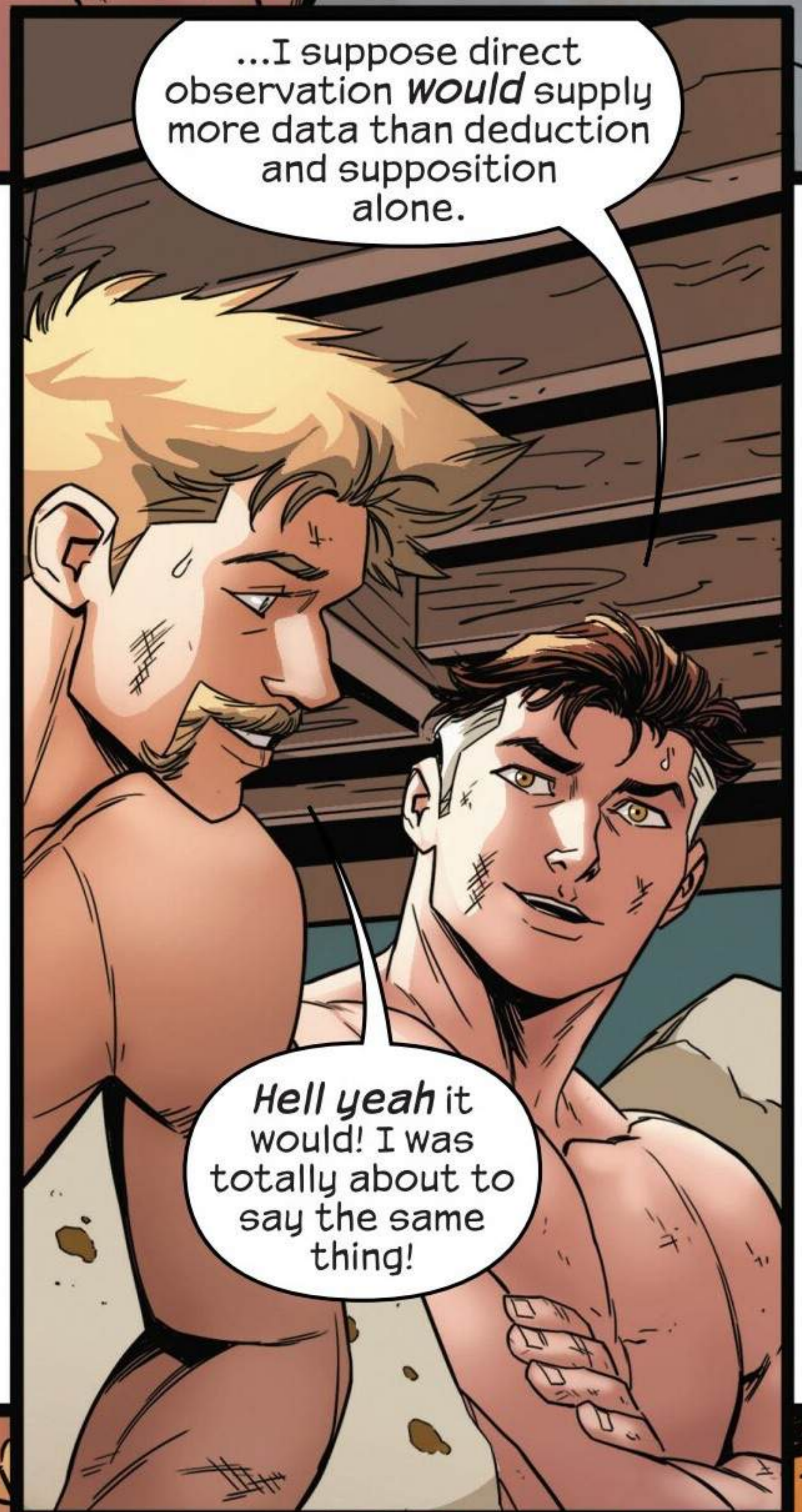


The parable of *Chesterton's Fence* comes to mind, suggesting we not disturb it any further until we understand **why** it was built in the first place.

But we're so close! And wouldn't the **best** way to understand it be...

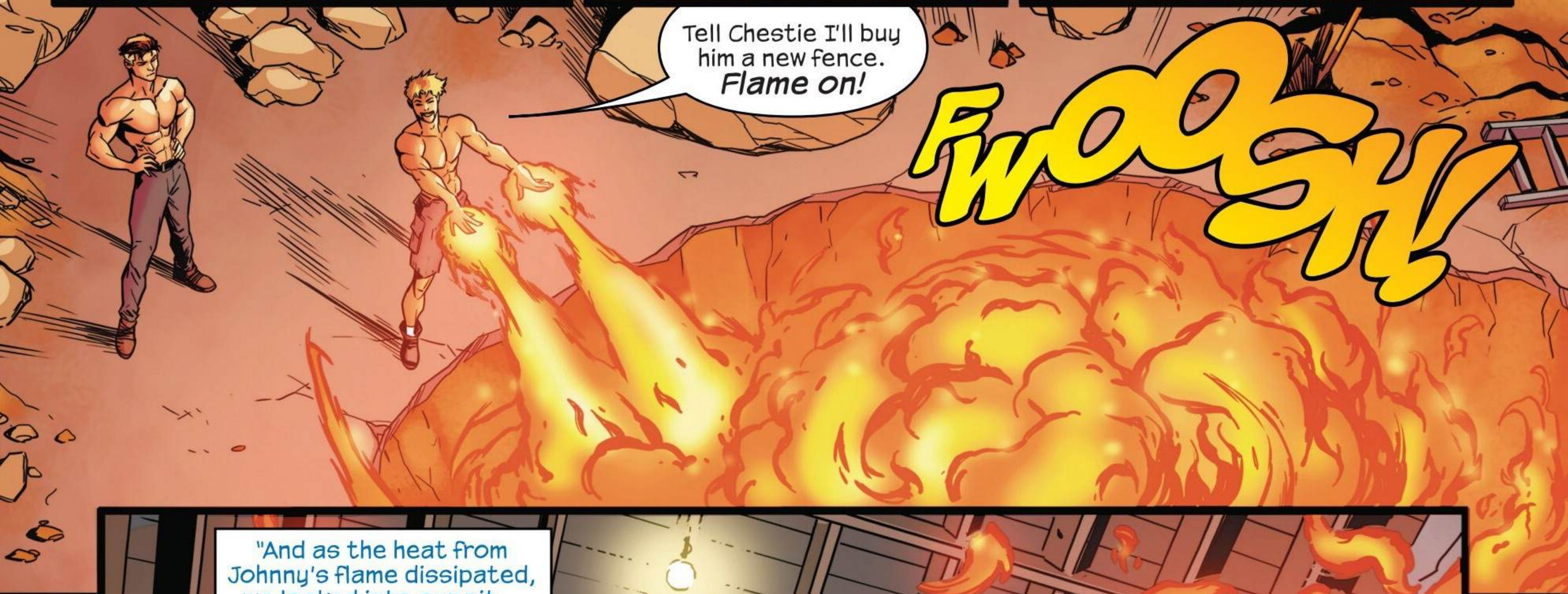


...to **find out** what's on the other side...?



...I suppose direct observation **would** supply more data than deduction and supposition alone.

Hell yeah it would! I was totally about to say the same thing!



Tell Chestie I'll buy him a new fence. **Flame on!**

FWOOSH!



"And as the heat from Johnny's flame dissipated, we looked into our pit..."

"...and I observed
that we may have
made a *mistake*."

JOHNNY
STORM &
REED
RICHARDS IN:

"BLOOD BROTHERS"

FWOOH!

Oh crap
oh crap oh
crap!

Flame off,
flame off!



The boulders! They must've been holding these ghosts back!!



"By converting my fingers to *rigid rollers*, the friction coefficient was significantly reduced--by as much as 0.5 by my estimate."

"Yes. That's what I was thinking about just then too. I just love to estimate friction coefficients in crisis situations."

RRRGH!
ARRRRGH!



Heave!



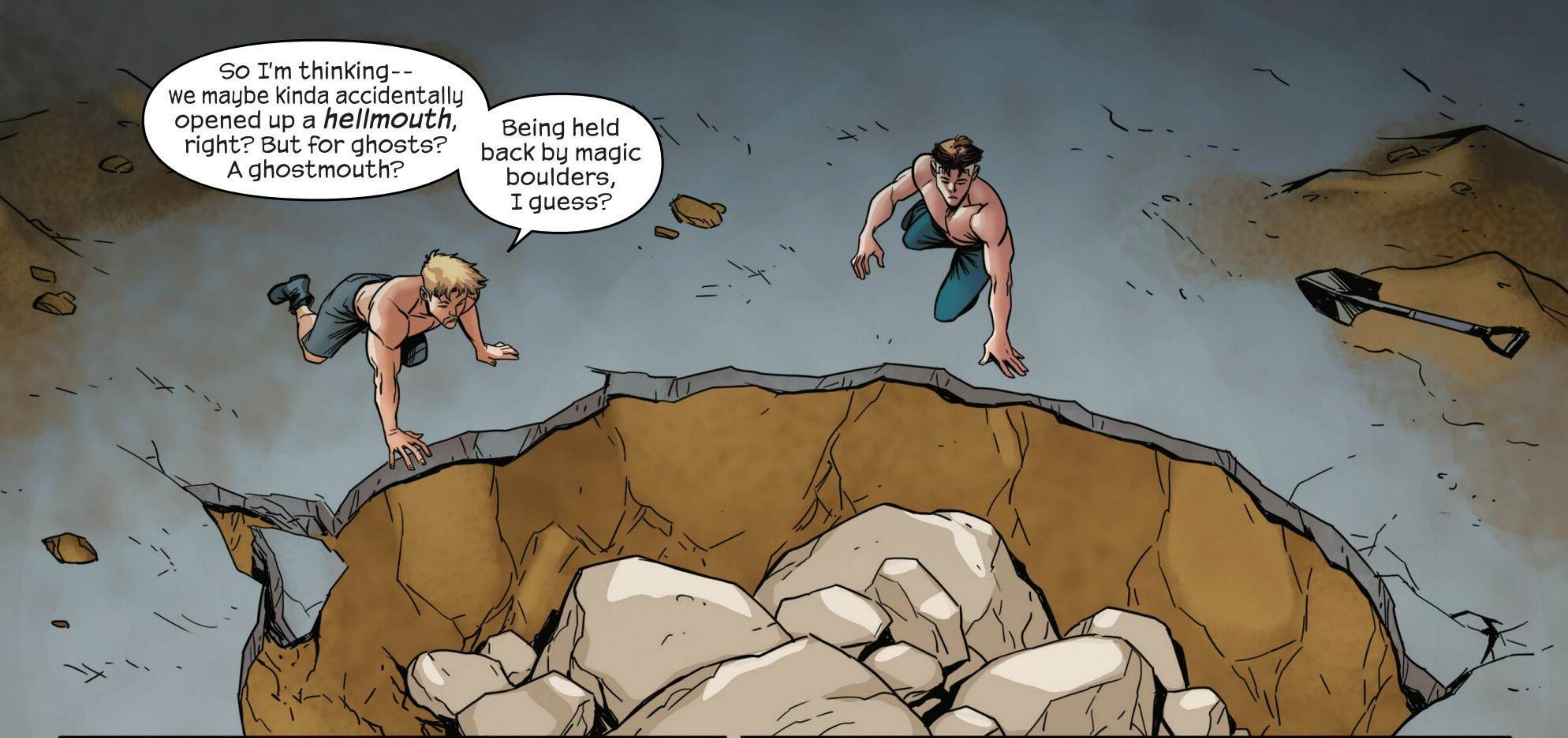
YES!!



Oh my god-- that was *so hard*.

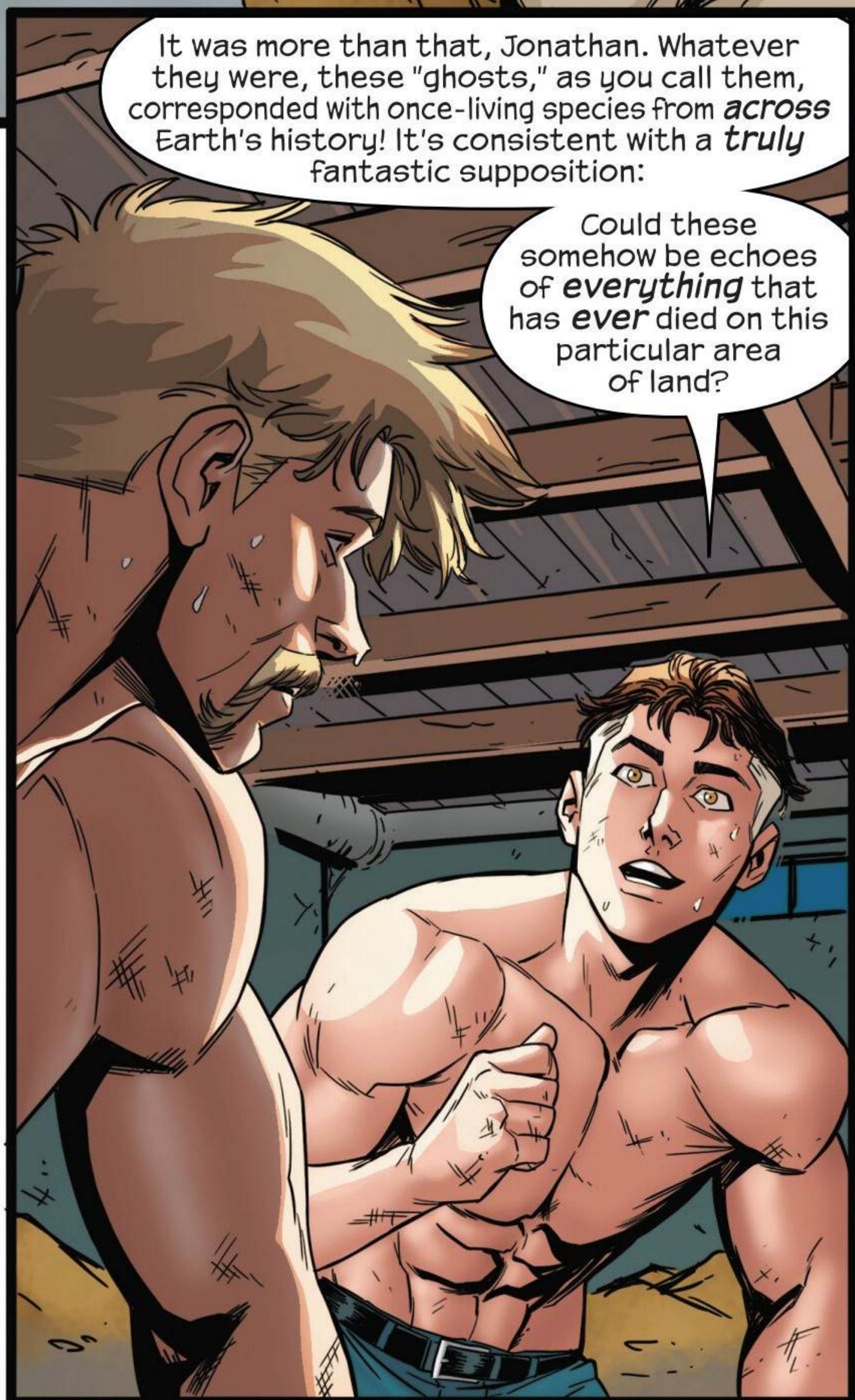
Agreed.

I take it all back: Ben *is* a super-valued member of this team. Holy Hannah.



So I'm thinking--
we maybe kinda accidentally
opened up a **hellmouth**,
right? But for ghosts?
A ghostmouth?

Being held
back by magic
boulders,
I guess?



It was more than that, Jonathan. Whatever
they were, these "ghosts," as you call them,
corresponded with once-living species from *across*
Earth's history! It's consistent with a *truly*
fantastic supposition:

Could these
somehow be echoes
of **everything** that
has **ever** died on this
particular area
of land?



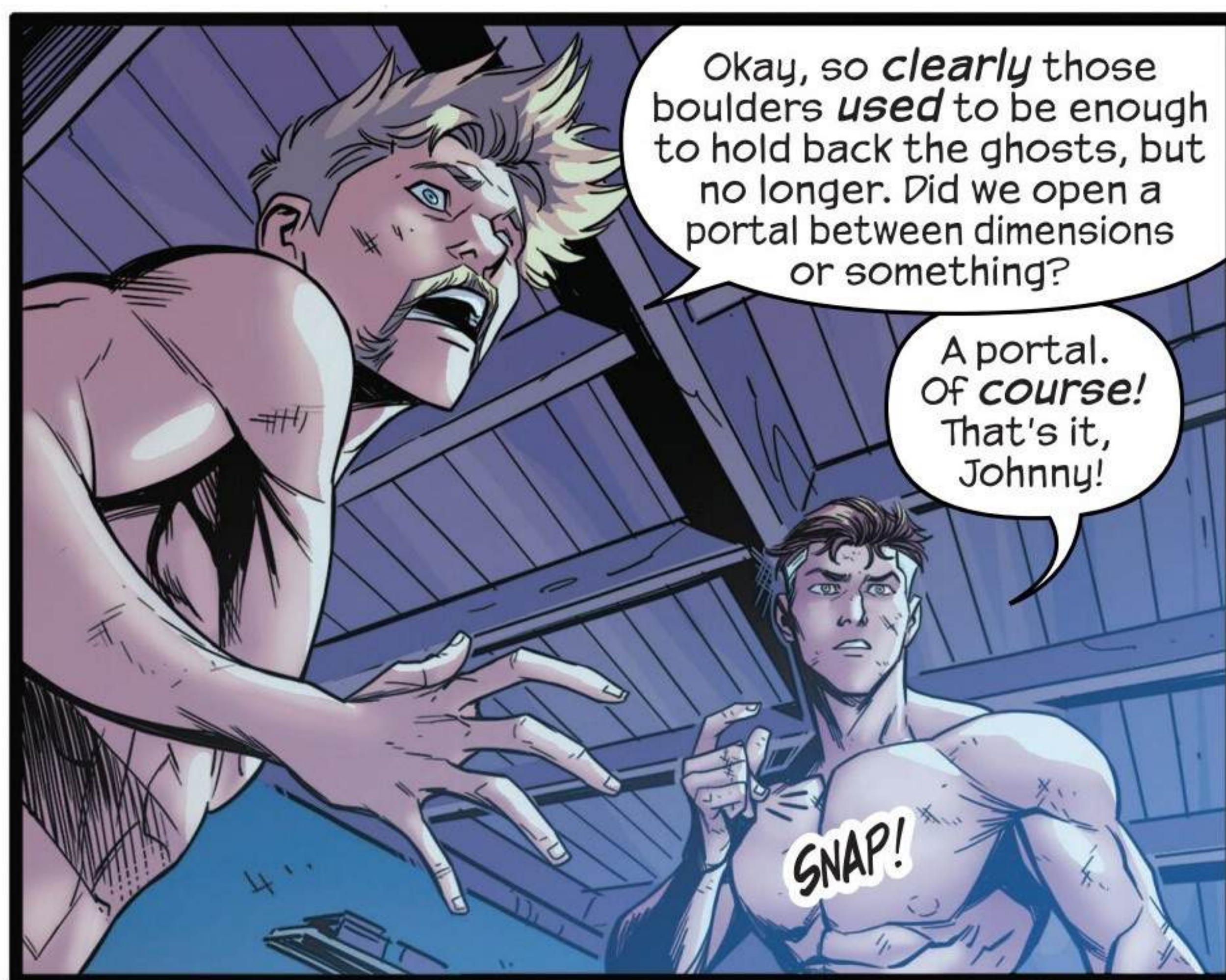
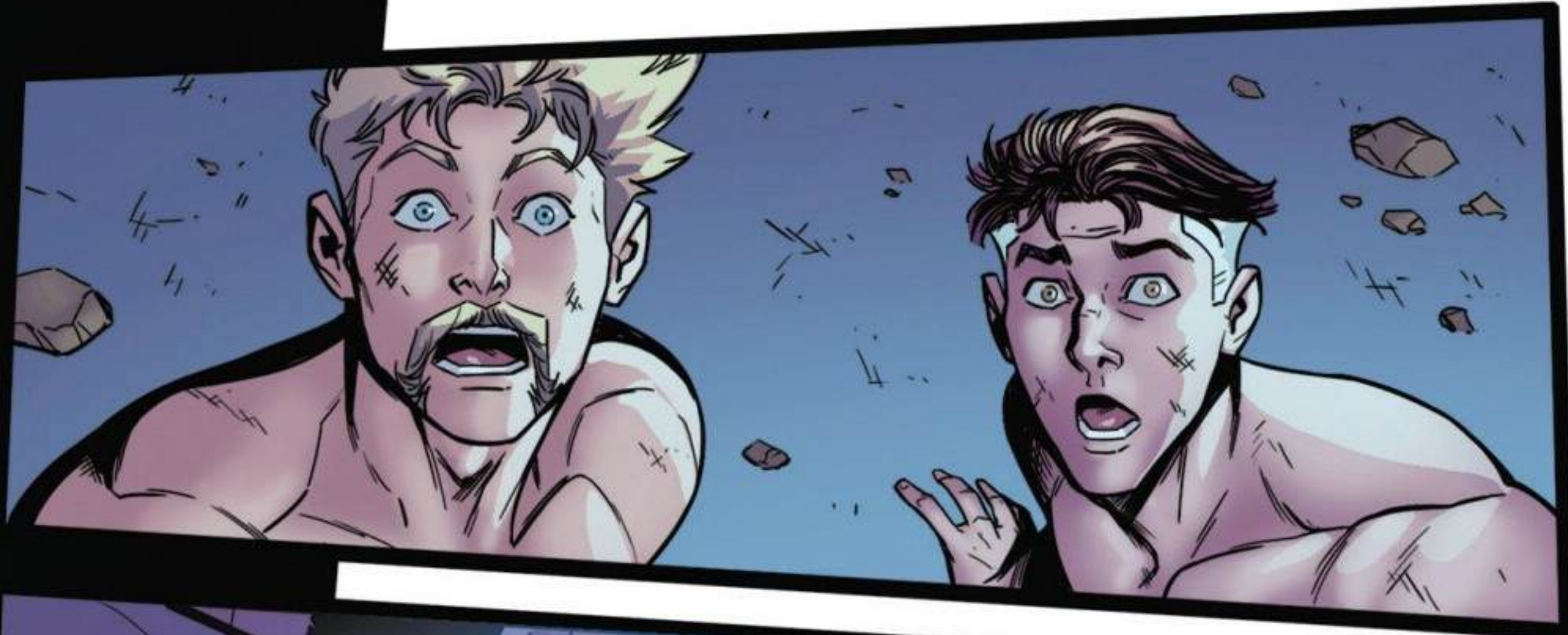
If so, it's **remarkable**. The
research we could do on the
beetles alone...

Yeah, man,
I totally want to do
science on ghost beetles too.
But first, we gotta round those
ghosts up before the **others**
get home, and then we
gotta--

Did
you hear
something?



Aw,
dang
it.





That's your idea?
A hose?! **GHOSTS
AREN'T WEAK
AGAINST WATER,**
Reed!!

If I'm
correct, a
hose is all we
need!

"Magic" or not, the fact normal
boulders were *initially* used
to seal this portal suggests
that matter from our world
can still *interact* with and
even take *precedence* over
matter/energy from
theirs, which...

YES!

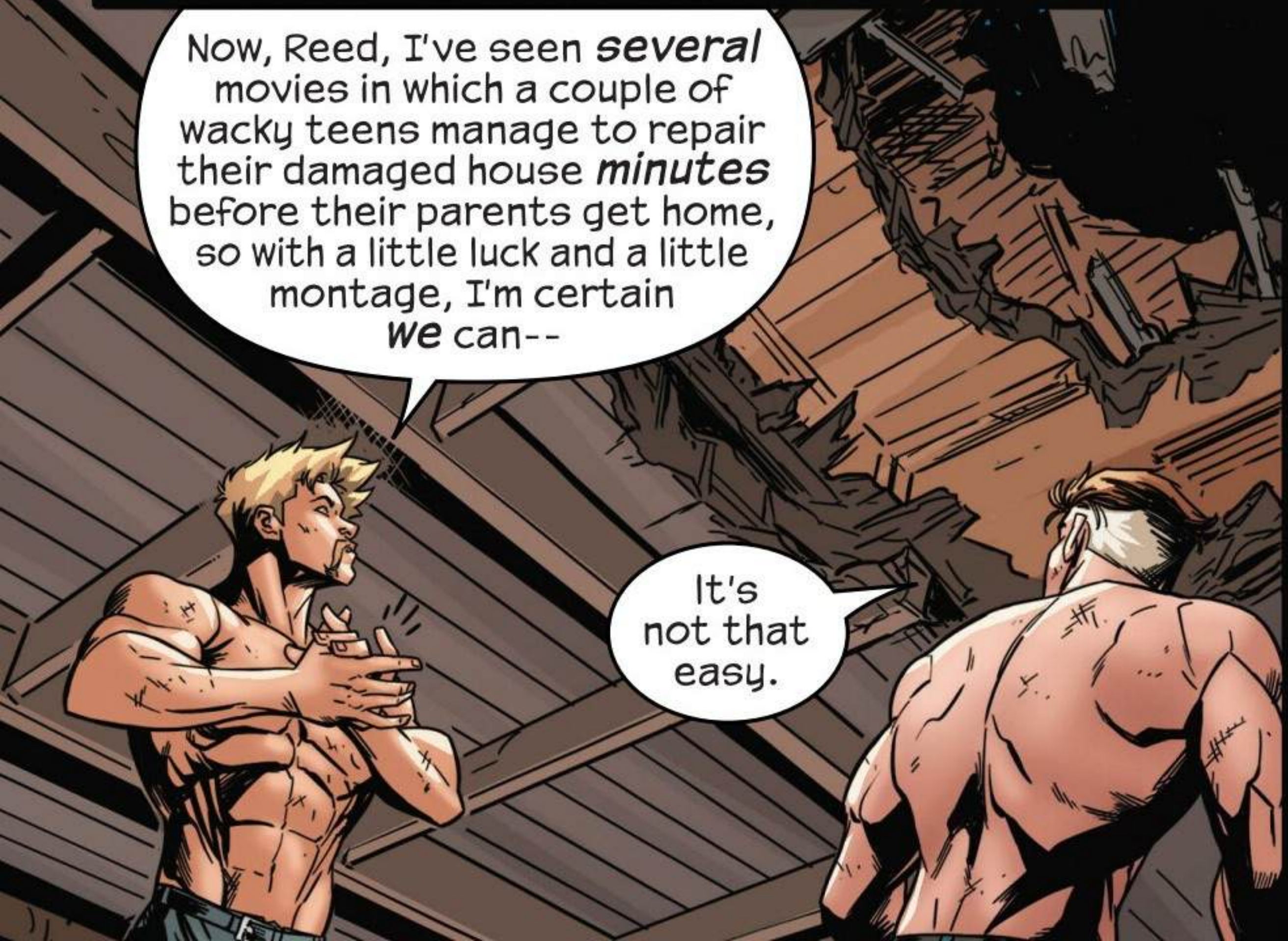
Look,
Johnny! It's
closing!



Whatever
gateway there is
here, it can only transmit
things *through* itself in
one direction at a time--
just like this
hose!

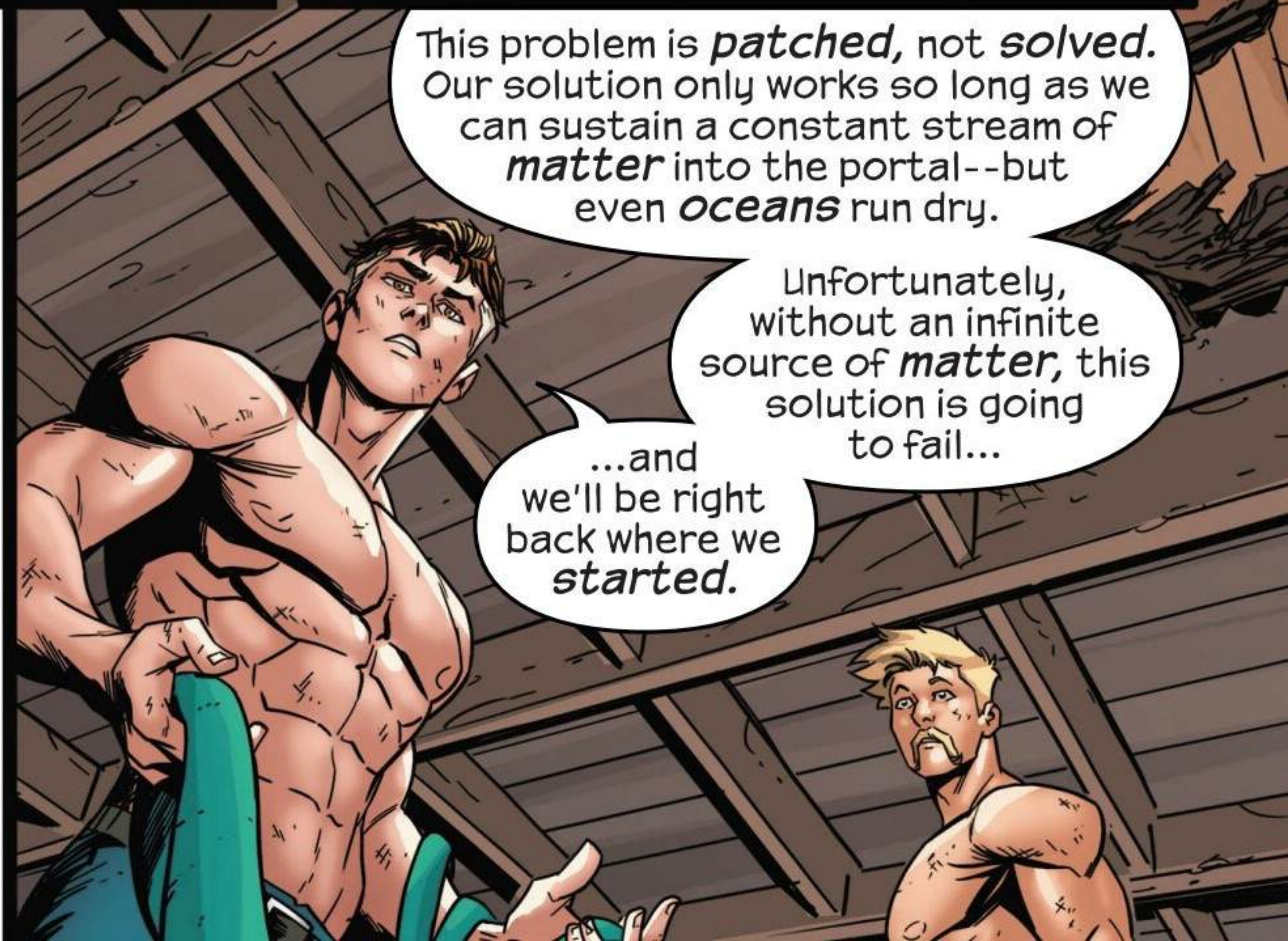
So if enough
stuff's going *into*
it from *our* world,
then nothing can come
out of it from theirs!

Perfect!
We did it!



Now, Reed, I've seen *several*
movies in which a couple of
wacky teens manage to repair
their damaged house *minutes*
before their parents get home,
so with a little luck and a little
montage, I'm certain
we can--

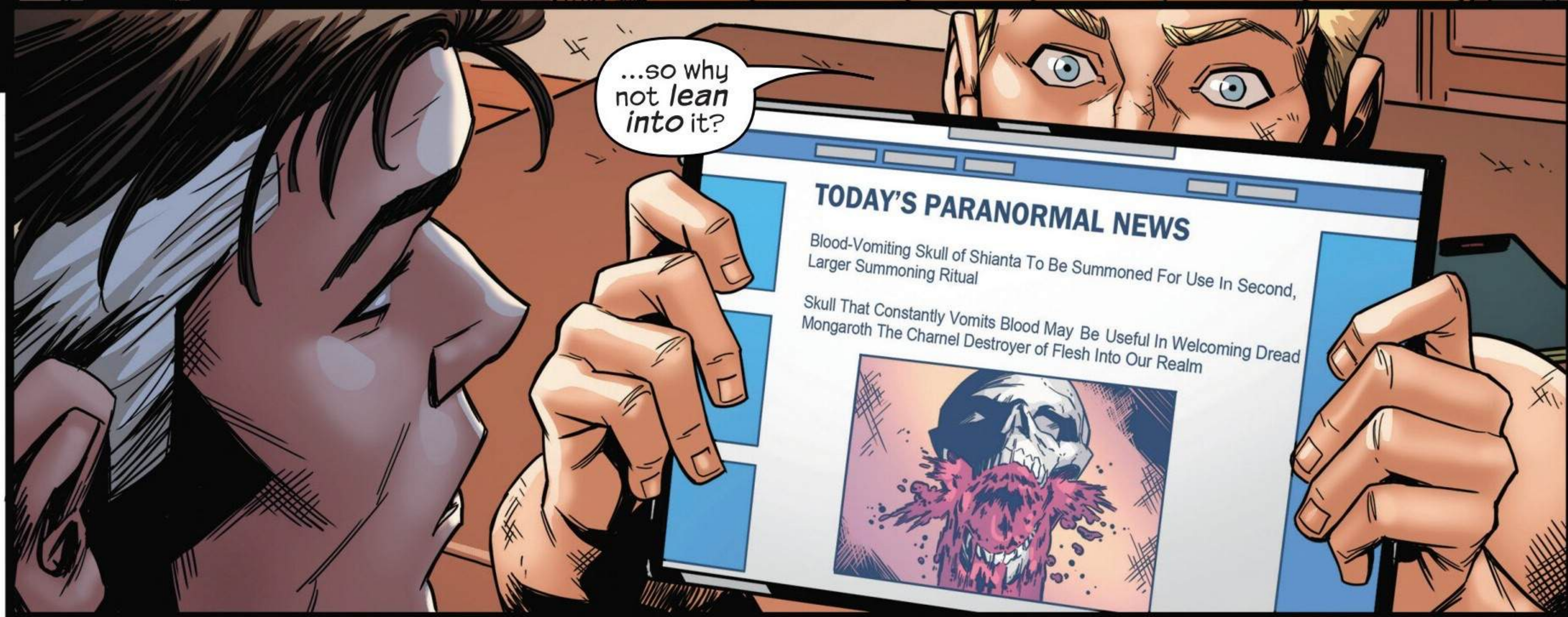
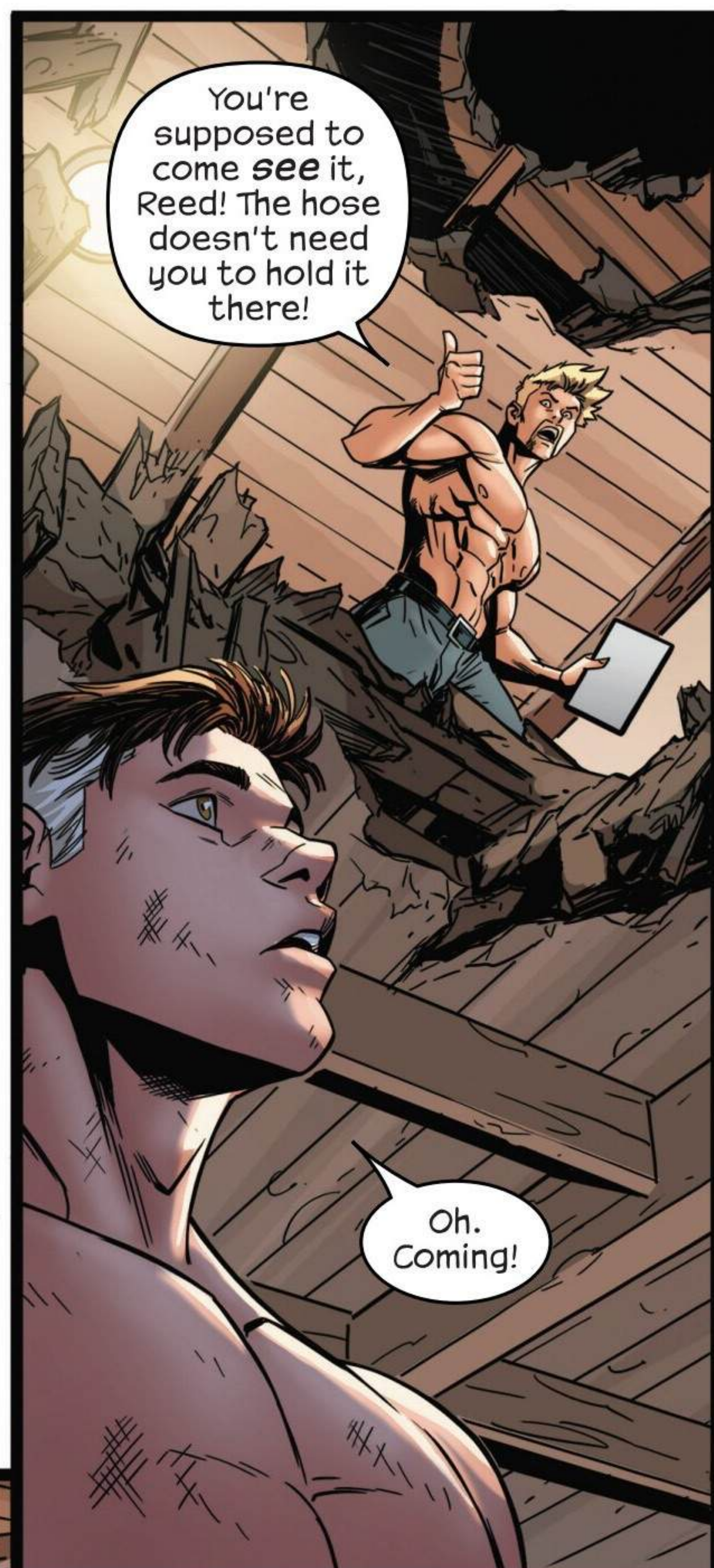
It's
not that
easy.



This problem is *patched*, not *solved*.
Our solution only works so long as we
can sustain a constant stream of
matter into the portal--but
even *oceans* run dry.

Unfortunately,
without an infinite
source of **matter**, this
solution is going
to fail...

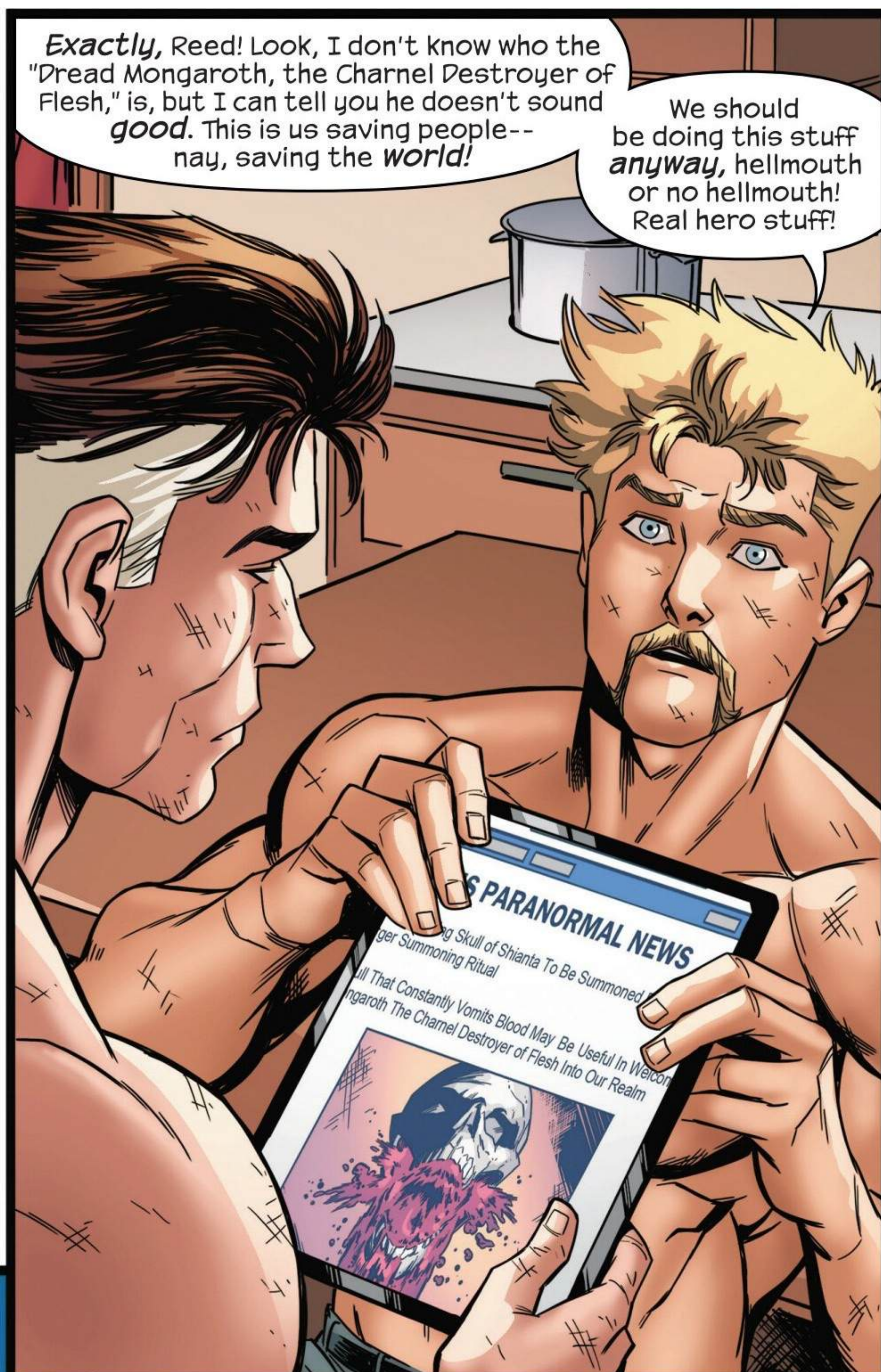
...and
we'll be right
back where we
started.





If we're to *assume* this reporting as credible, then you're suggesting-- what?

That we *steal* a cursed skull from a gang of occultists to forever plug this ghost portal?



Exactly, Reed! Look, I don't know who the "Dread Mongaroth, the Charnel Destroyer of Flesh," is, but I can tell you he doesn't sound *good*. This is us saving people-- nay, saving the *world*!

We should be doing this stuff *anyway*, hellmouth or no hellmouth! Real hero stuff!



Does the article say where the occultists are?

Already looked into it myself: the "catacombs of Paris."

Those are centuries-old ossuaries, filled with the bones of millions of the long-dead and constructed after the city's cemeteries literally overflowed into people's basements.

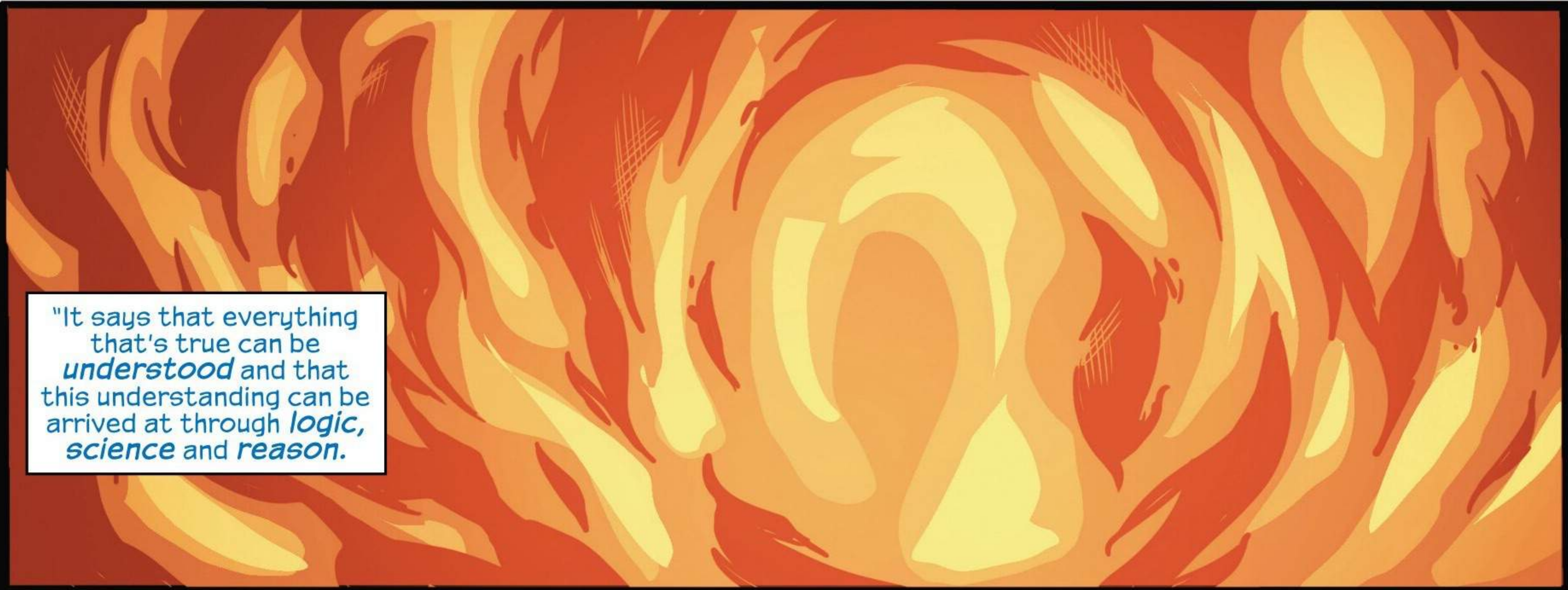


You don't have to sell *me* on it, man-- it already sounds great. They got walls of skulls and everything.

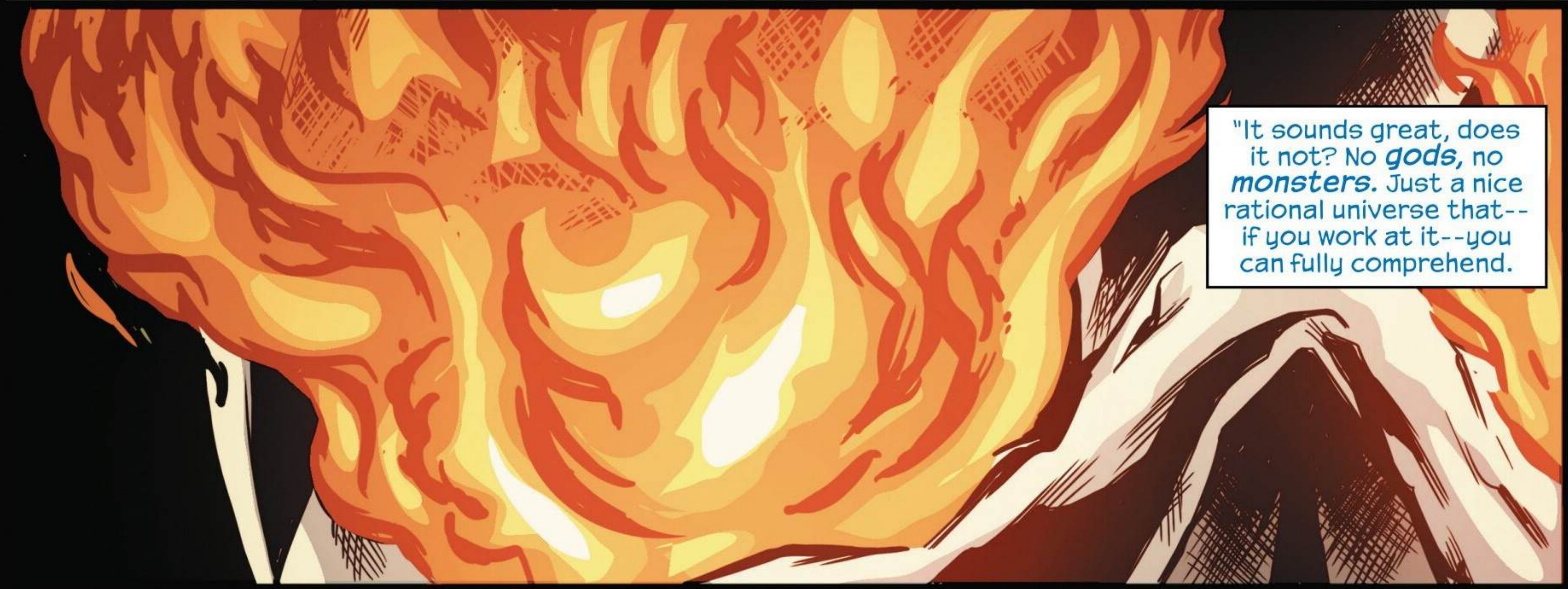
C'mon! The teleporter's upstairs!



"There's a school of philosophical thought called 'positivism.'



"It says that everything that's true can be *understood* and that this understanding can be arrived at through *logic, science* and *reason*."



"It sounds great, does it not? No *gods*, no *monsters*. Just a nice rational universe that-- if you work at it--you can fully comprehend."



"It's what I've always believed. And it's what I *still* believe..."

"...despite everything."

Keep running, Reed!
We're almost home free!

PLEUP!

PLEUP!

Grah!

It seems self-evident that we are nowhere *near* being either home or free, Johnny!

Get them!
Kill the interlopers!

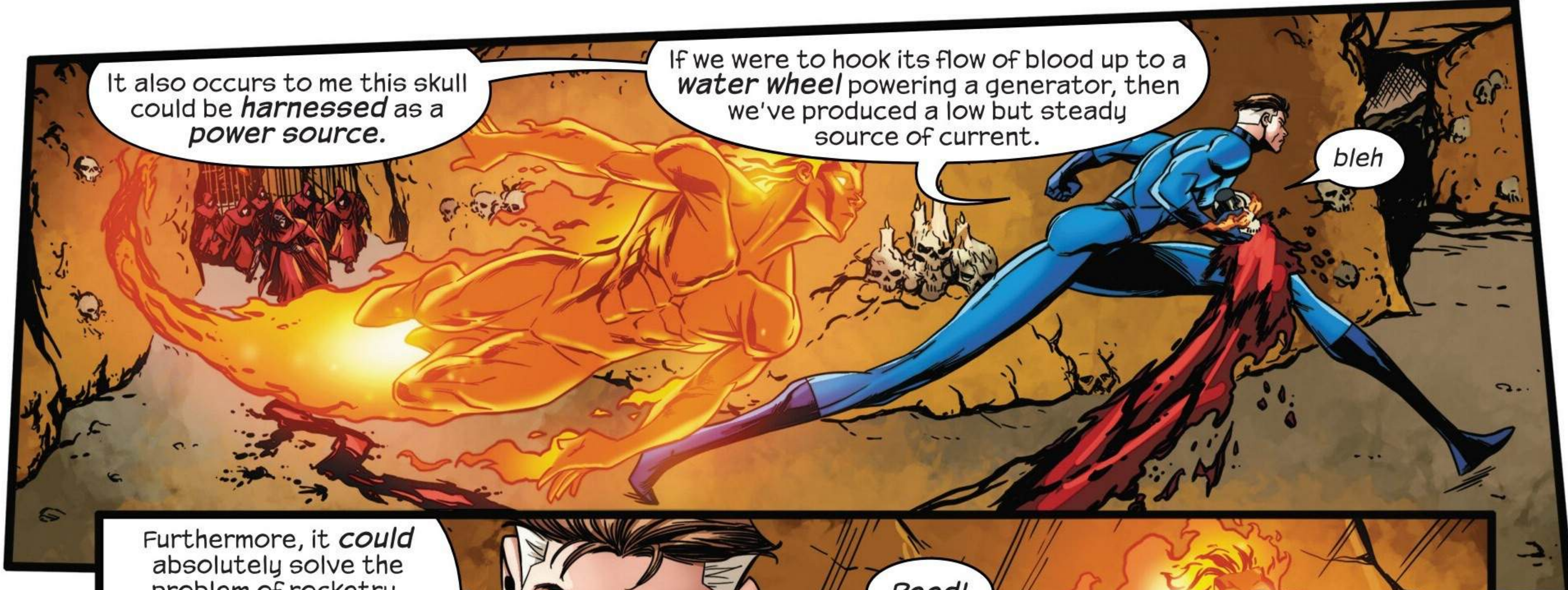
bleh

It occurs to me, Johnny, that mere hours ago, I was happily working on my next invention.

And now you've got a cute li'l magic skull guy spewing blood everywhere! That's life, baby!!

bleh





It also occurs to me this skull could be *harnessed* as a *power source*.

If we were to hook its flow of blood up to a *water wheel* powering a generator, then we've produced a low but steady source of current.

bleh



Furthermore, it *could* absolutely solve the problem of rocketry, given that the *thrust* any blood-as-fuel combustion provides wouldn't carry a corresponding increase in the weight to be moved!

Reed!



It's a dead end. We gotta fight these guys!

Right. Of course.



"I go for my catch-phrase: It's awesome, it's fun and it's *intimidating*."

Flame on!



"Reed goes in a--*different* direction."

Greetings! Have you somehow never considered the myriad ways in which an artifact that produces *mass* without *energy* could better humanity?!



"Unfortunately, we had to resort to physical violence to preserve the Skull of Shianta."

"What he's saying is we had a *rad fight scene* with the occultists."

PLEUP!
PLEUP!



"Violence is never 'rad,' Johnny."

Hah!
Missed me!



"Reed's right. It was super dull and boring to be using *literal super-powers* while battling *occultists* in a *secret crypt* lined with skulls."

"Which was, I will add, *also* slowly filling with *skull blood*."



"Honestly, I could barely keep my eyes open."

"In any case, we defeated the occultists, alerted the authorities and returned back home...

"...with the *Skull of Shianta* and its endless vomitus blood in hand.

There: The last of the torrent of ghosts is closing as the skull's blood clogs the channel.

Perfect.



"Then we carefully *refilled* the hole--leaving, of course, a pathway for the blood to enter the portal."

"Then all that was left was a layer of concrete on top and my patented quick-cure flames..."



"...and the ol' basement floor was as good as new!"







Sue! We are **NOT**. Some people *wish* their brother and husband got along as well as *we* do!

At least you and Ben *squabble*. You and Reed just encourage each other! With nobody around to stop you, the two of you just--just turn your *shenanigans* up to *eleven*, chasing after every single *zany scheme* that drifts into your heads!



"Zany" feels a *little* unfair. Again, if I could draw your attention to how the dread Mongaroth is not charnally destroying *any* mortal flesh at present, I think you'll see--

Honey, you're supposed to be the *smartest man* in the **UNIVERSE**!



And yet, in the space of *four hours*, Reed--**FOUR HOURS**--you dug a pit *inside our house*--

--to a *hellmouth*--

--which ya *opened*--

--and then "fixed" by stealing a *cursed blood skull* from *French cultists*--

--which is wearing a teeny little *magic top hat*--

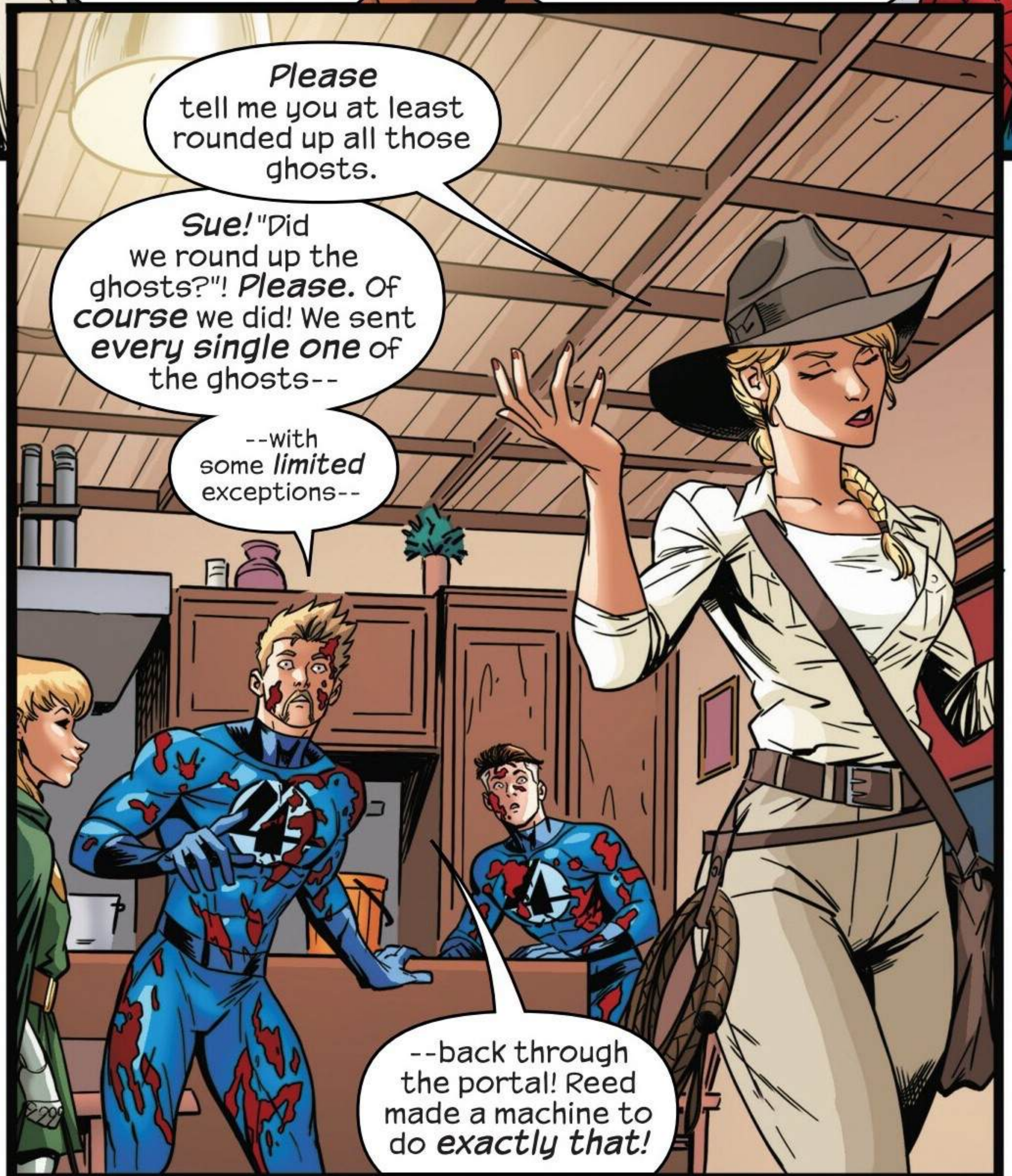
--an' is now forever *pukin' blood* into *another dimension* under our *basement*.



I mean, *yes*, but, *uh*--

We're reliably informed it's prophesied to spew blood until "the stars themselves go out," darling.

No other skull can make this claim.

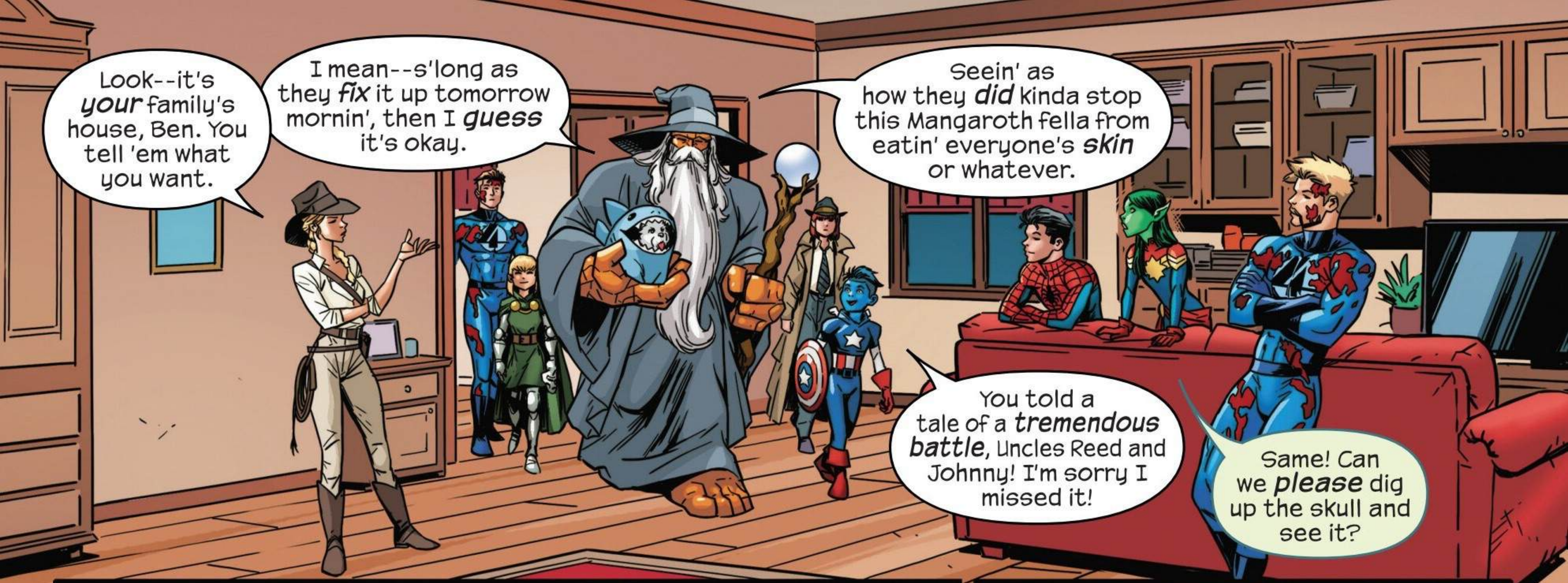


Please tell me you at least rounded up all those ghosts.

Sue! "Did we round up the ghosts?"! *Please*. Of *course* we did! We sent *every single one* of the ghosts--

--with some *limited* exceptions--

--back through the portal! Reed made a machine to do *exactly that*!



Look--it's *your* family's house, Ben. You tell 'em what you want.

I mean--s'long as they *fix* it up tomorrow mornin', then I *guess* it's okay.

Seein' as how they *did* kinda stop this Mangaroth fella from eatin' everyone's *skin* or whatever.

You told a tale of a *tremendous battle*, Uncles Reed and Johnny! I'm sorry I missed it!

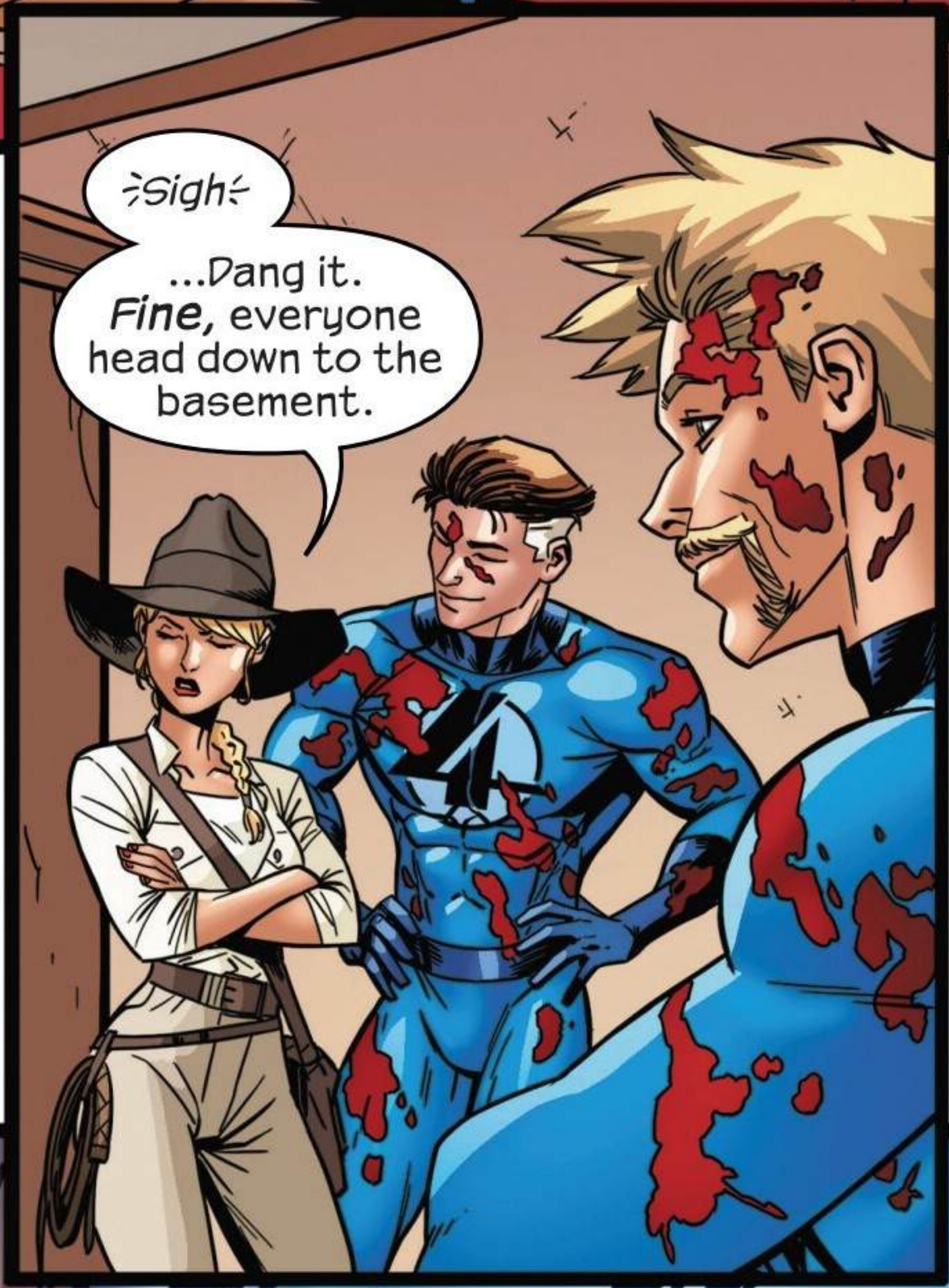
Same! Can we *please* dig up the skull and see it?



No, Nicki. The first thing they teach you at Mom School is not to let your kids disturb *any* cursèd skulls.

But Mom could make the ground *invisible! Please?* Just a little *peek?*

We won't disturb it! Just for a *minute?* A *second?*



~Sigh~
...Dang it. *Fine*, everyone head down to the basement.



Cooooooooooooooooo!!

bleh



Now come on, kids. It's *way* past your bedtime.

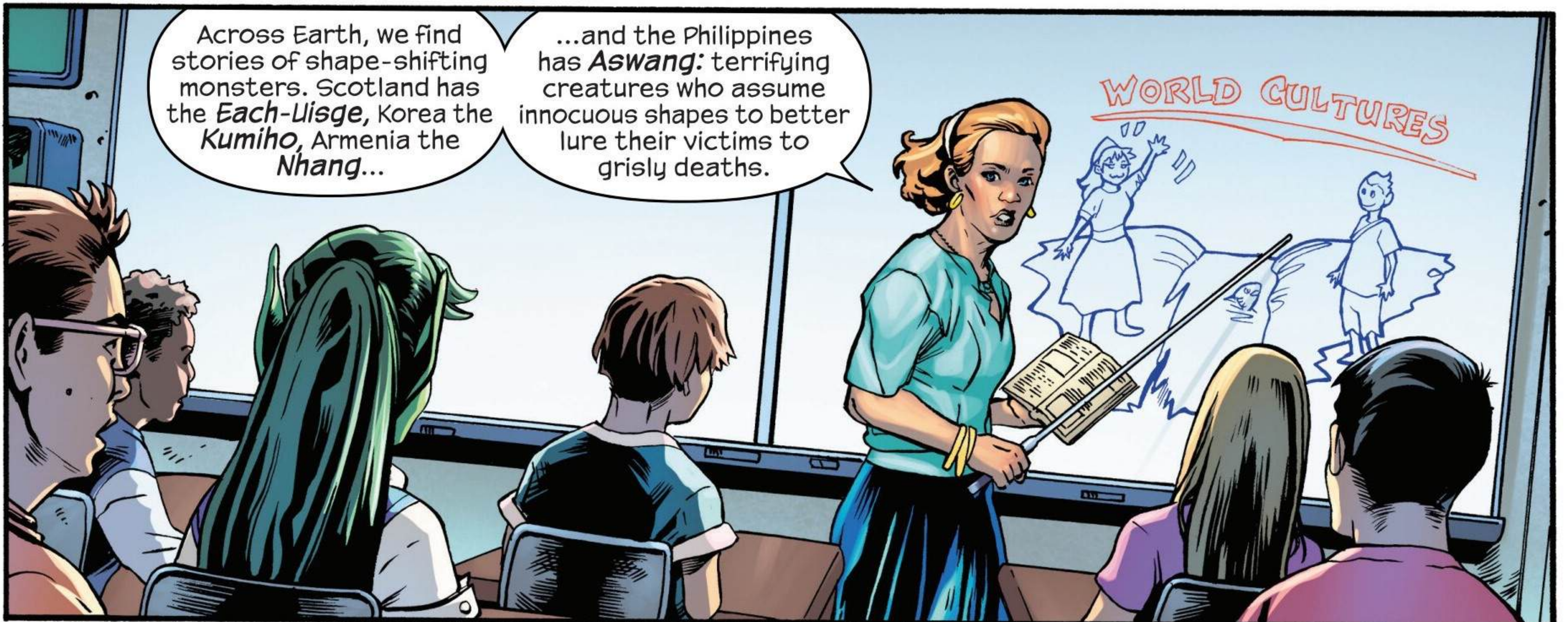
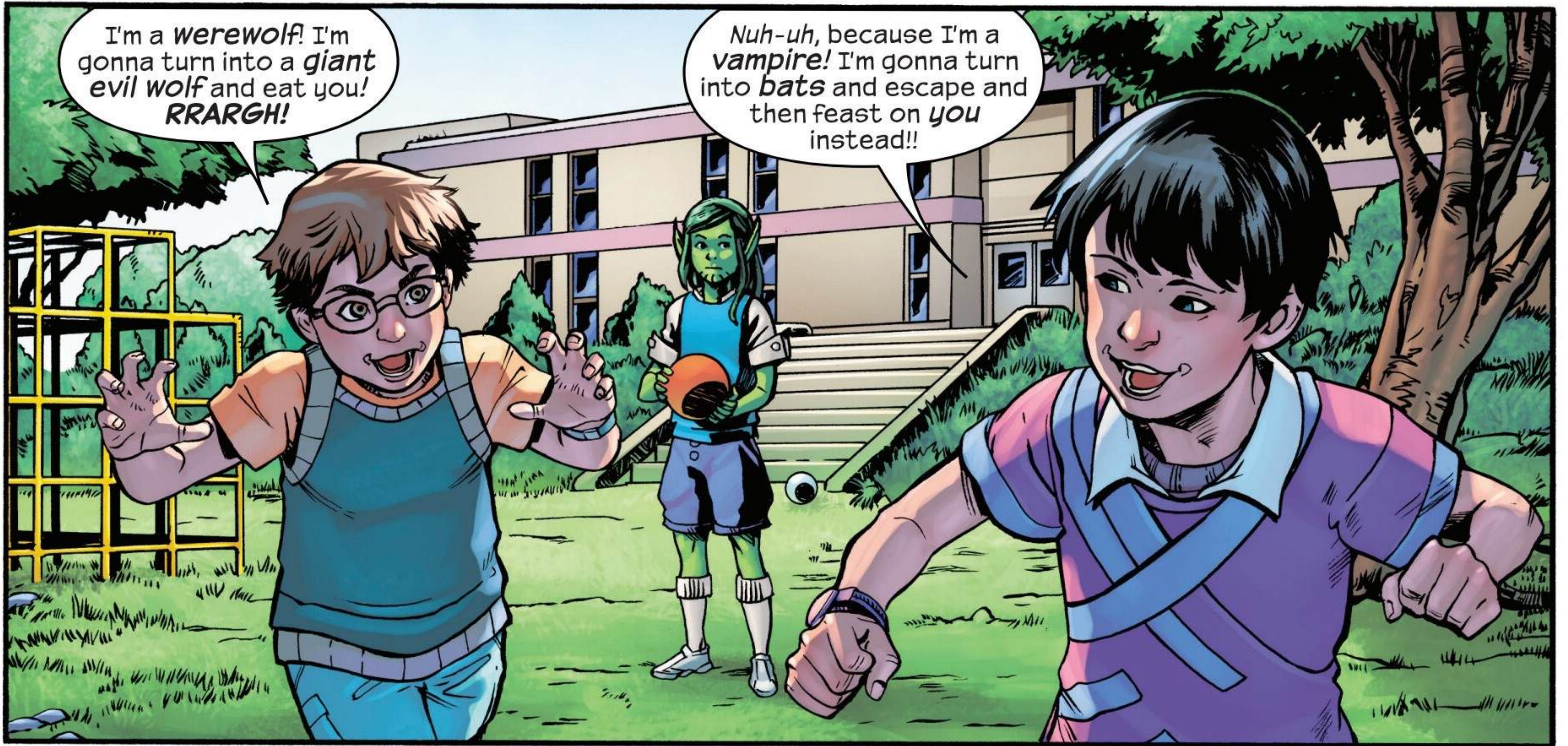
Incidentally, some of their beds *may* have been demolished. I'll get the air mattresses and sleeping bags.

Hey! Who here wants to go *Halloween camping* with their *cool* Uncle Johnny in the front yard?

Me!







I'm a Skrull, and
I'm a shape-shifter,
but I'm *not* a
monster.

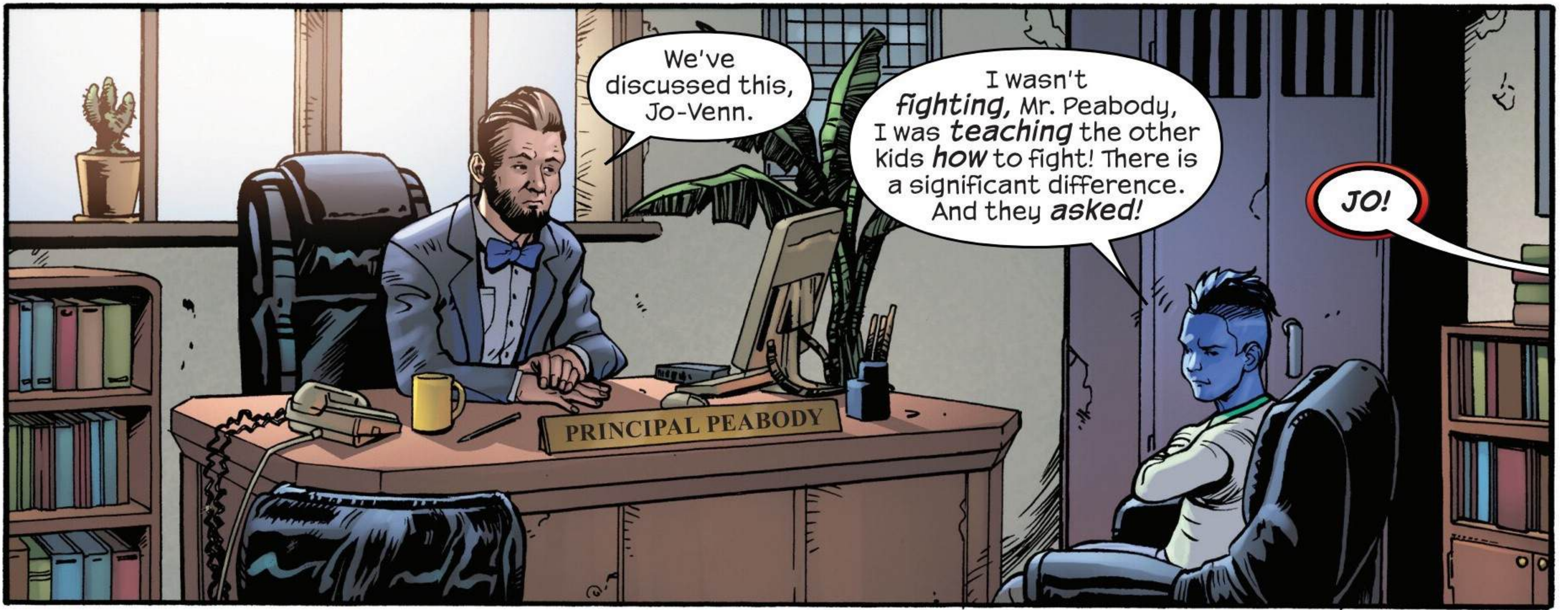
And if
Earth thinks *that's*
what shape-shifters
are...

...then I guess
I'll just have to show
everyone how *wrong*
they can be.



NICKI
MASTERS-GRIMM IN:

"WAY, SHAPE OR FORM"





"Space dweeb"?
Wait a second. Nicki?

Surprise! Shape-shifting saves...



...the day...



...once again!



I must admit: That was *awesome*. Even if *you* are the one who is the *true* space dweeb.

Though with your Dad form *that* good, it seems a shame to not use it *more*...

What are you thinking?



Bah! I'm th' *Thing*, from th' *Fantastic Four*, and I wanna rent *scary movies*!! Children under 13 can't rent them, but *I* can!

That's honestly not a problem, sir.

Well, good!



Wait, sorry, *how* did you get these movies?

Oh, I'm proving to everyone that shape-shifters are actually good guys and not monsters. You two need help with anything?

Well, now that you mention it...







Franklin, Val and Jo are grounded for taking *advantage* of me. Sure! *Fine*.

But *I* get grounded just for shape-shifting into my parents?



How is *that* fair?



Hey. I got us a snack, sweetheart.

I think th' *Geneva Convention* at least allows ya ta have a *hot chocko*.



Dad, on Skrullos, it's a *compliment* to study someone so well that you can duplicate them! Shape-shifting is what I *do*.

And I know humans think we're *monsters*, but--

Hey. No. Yer *not* a monster, and I want ya to *know* that, okay?



I know better than most how it feels when folks judge ya because of how ya *look*. But I can tell ya this: Nobody thinks yer a monster, and nobody's *gonna* think that.

Yer my perfect daughter, you hear me?



Your perfect daughter who's grounded for *literally* doing what *I* was born to do.

Well, there's gotta be *rules* about it, kiddo.

tink!



Look: On Earth, when ya pass yerself off as other people, you may **mean** it as a compliment, but it's doin' harm.

Just--don't do it at **school**, okay? And when yer not at school, get an adult's **permission** first.



Get permission--to be who I am.

Nah, Nick, who ya **are** is great. I'm sayin' ta get permission when ya want ta change into someone **else**.

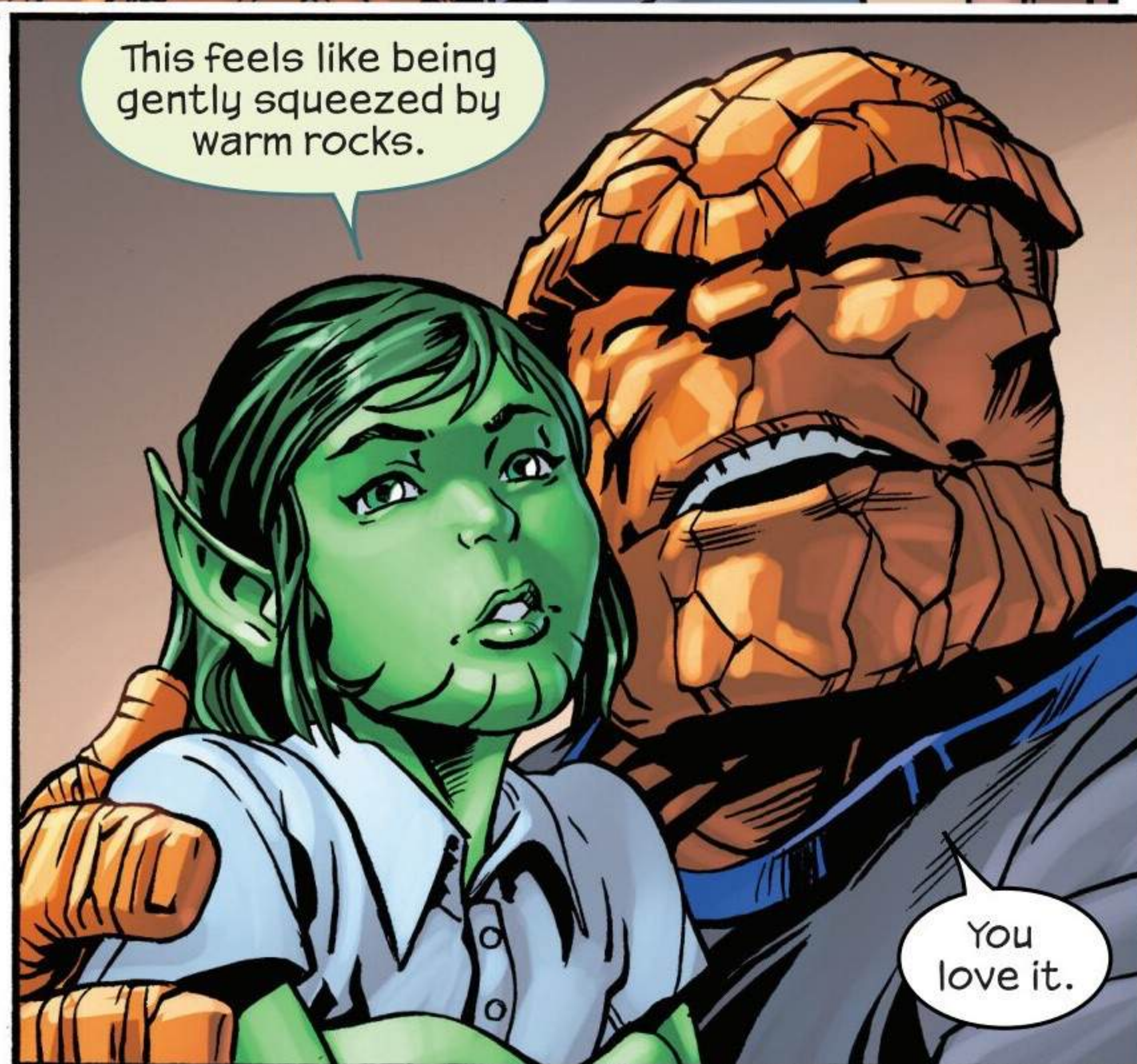
We Earthlings need ta know who we're dealin' with, that's all.



Please, kiddo. Fer me?

...Fine.

For you, Dad.



This feels like being gently squeezed by warm rocks.

You love it.



I do.





Behold, *educators!* The great *Mole Man* has come at last to your *undefended* schoolhouse!

And if you schoolmarms and schoolmasters don't give up the *children* of the *Fantastic Four*...

...I will reduce you *and* your establishment to ruins!

You tell 'em, master!



Ah, but perhaps you *surface dwellers* don't believe me, yes? Perhaps a *demonstration* of sincerity is called for?

Tricephalous, my dear, if you would be so kind...

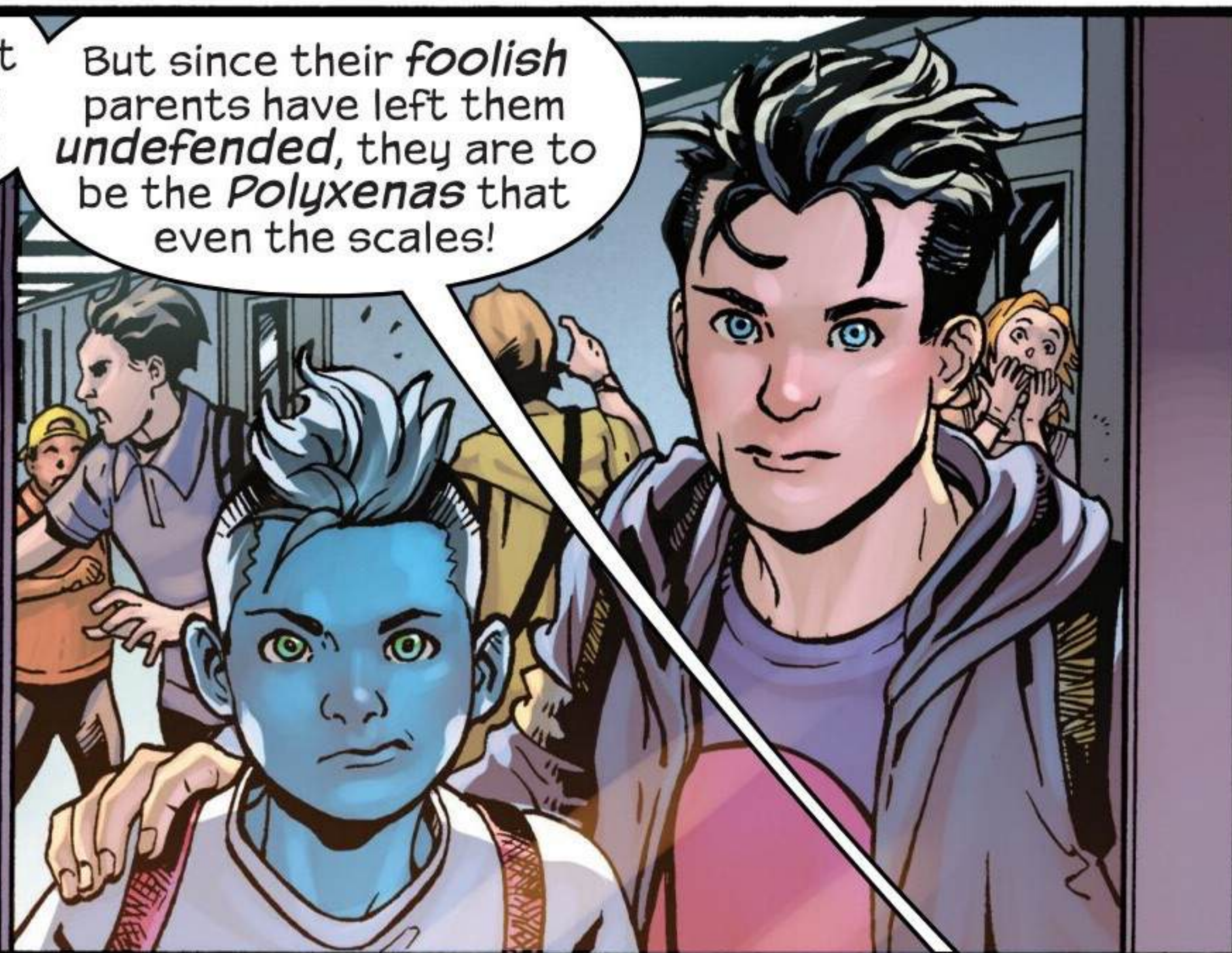


Now then. Give me the children.

Give me Franklin and Valeria Richards.



Their lives have been forfeit ever since the *Fantastic Four* dared to *stymie* my machinations!



But since their *foolish* parents have left them *undefended*, they are to be the *Polyxenas* that even the scales!



I will *destroy* this Mole Man in battle--both for his *attack* on this noble Earth infrastructure, as well as the *insult* of not including me and Nicki as children of the *Fantastic Four*!

Wait, Jo, *hold up*!

I don't think he actually *knows* about you and Nicki!



How could he not? It's not like they're a secret.

And it's not like Ben and Alicia took out TV spots when they adopted them either. Mole Man is a *hundred years old* and he literally lives *underground*.

He's *perpetually* behind the times!



And if he doesn't know about Jo and Nicki... then that gives us an *advantage*.

Precisely. I think we *can* have the *Fantastic Four* here--if we're quick, and if we're *smart*. But it's going to take everyone's help...

But Dad told me not to shape-shift at school! ...

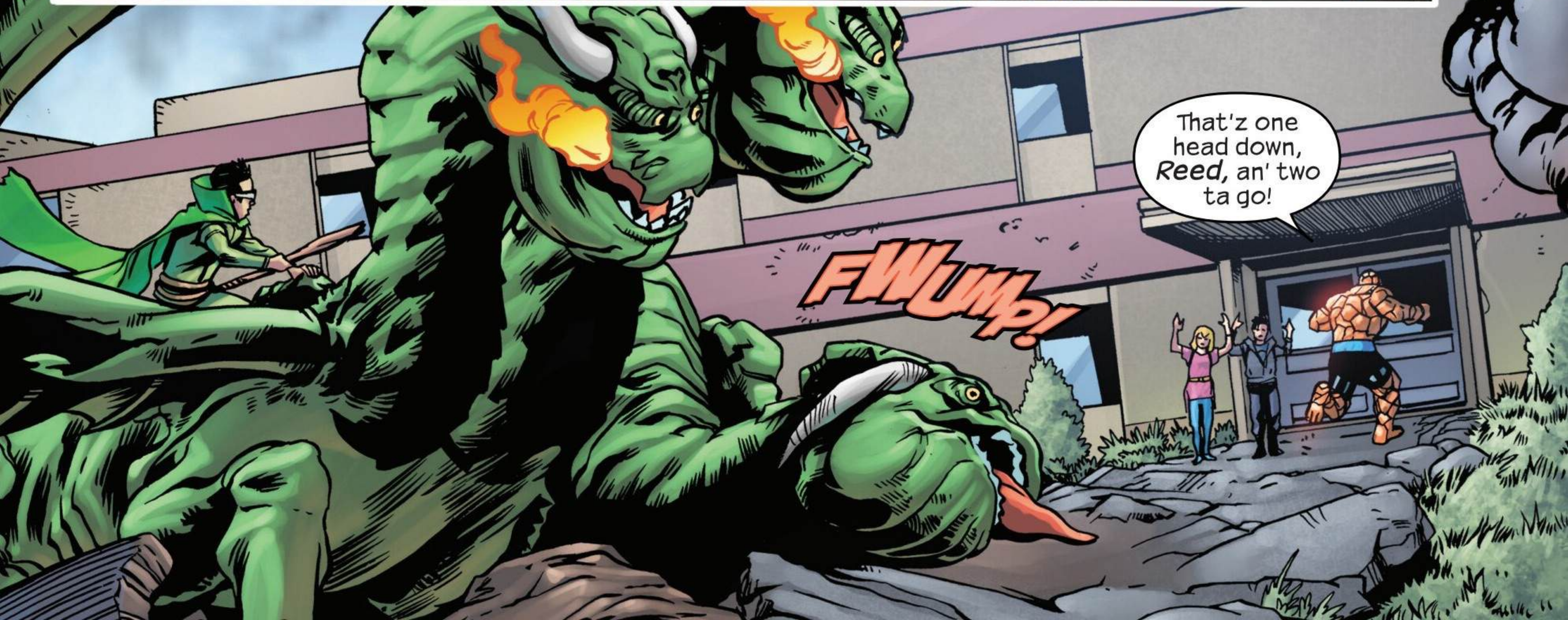


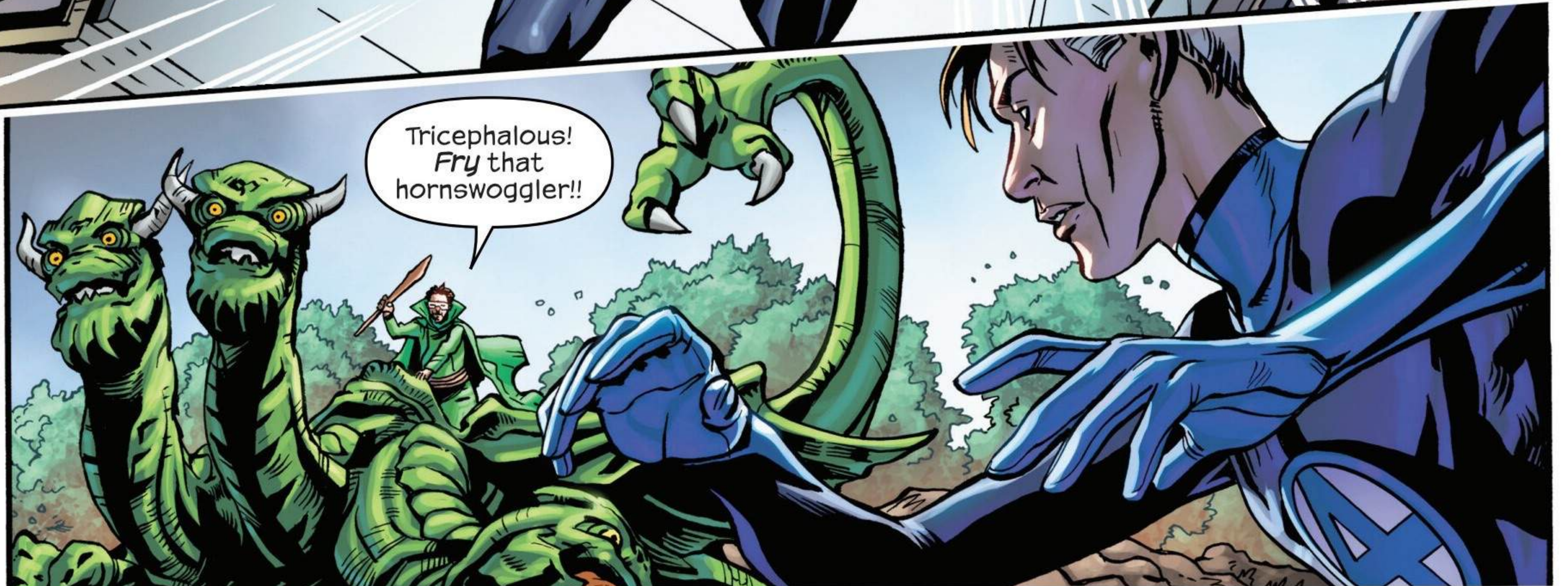
There. I said it, and you can tell Dad I was *for sure* the appropriate amount of reluctant to do this.



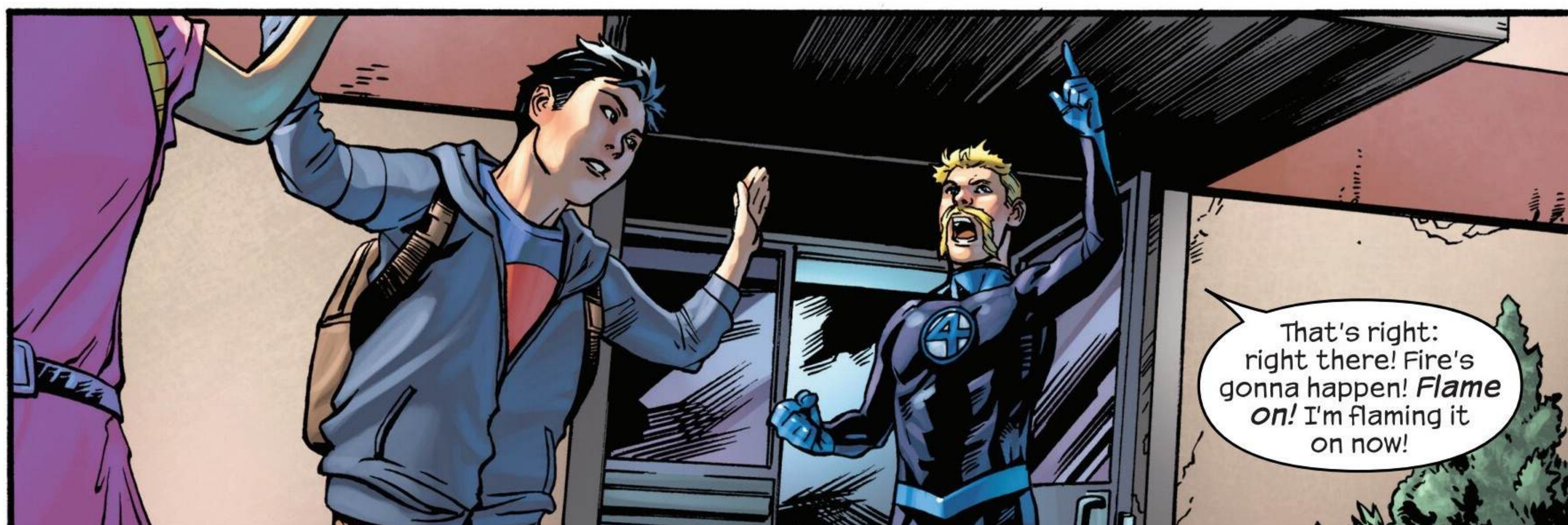
C'mon.

It's *clobbering* time.











And I can put a *force-field* around you, Mole Man! Surrender now or I'll do it! I'll--



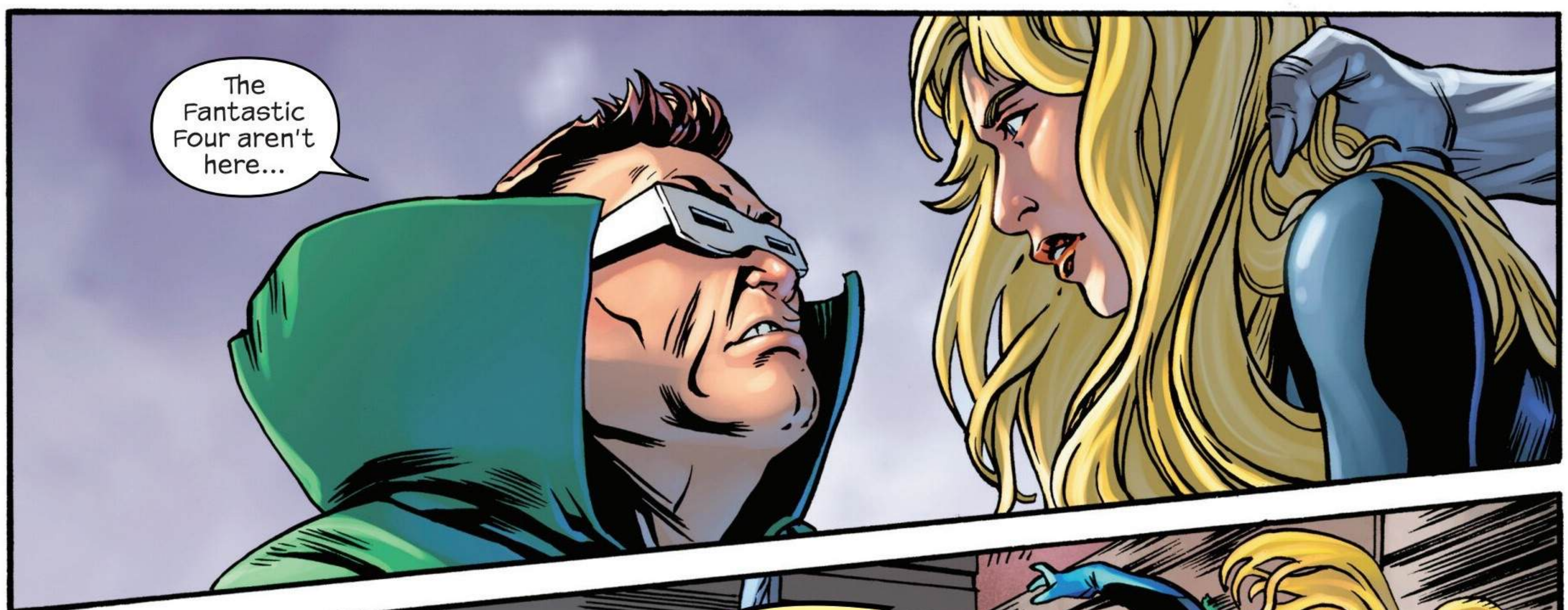
GRAH!



You fight *individually*. The Thing hits *weaker* than he normally does.

Mr. Fantastic stretches *less*.

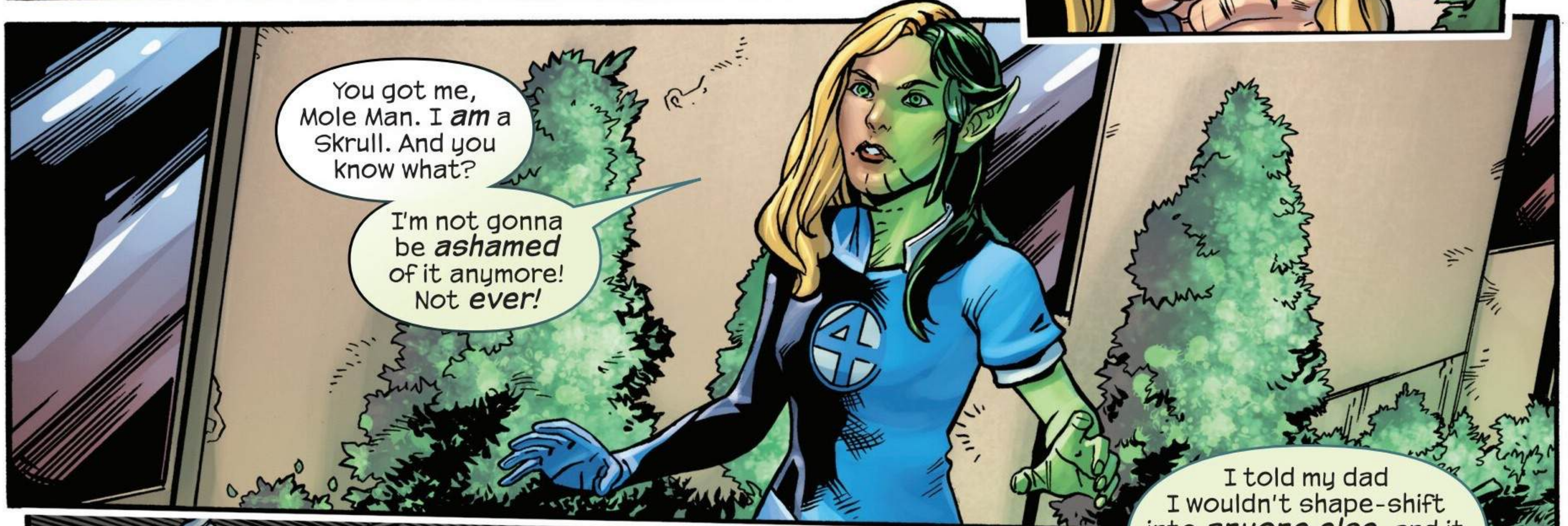
The Human Torch won't flame on, and the Invisible Woman only *threatens* use of her force-fields.



The Fantastic Four aren't here...



...and you're a damned dirty *Skrull*.





This is me,
Mole Man. The
real me.



Punch me,
and I'll harden
my skin.



Overpower me, and
I'll grow *bigger*
muscles.



Throw me, and I'll get
bigger, sturdier. I'm an
unstoppable force of
nature, a *whirlwind* of
smart, helpful, *good-*
guy *shape-*
shifting.



I adapt.
I overcome.

I'm **NICKI
MASTERS-
GRIMMI!**

And
you...

...you're
a mean guy
who lives alone in
a hole in the
ground.

Go home,
Mole Man, and
never bother me
and my family
ever again.

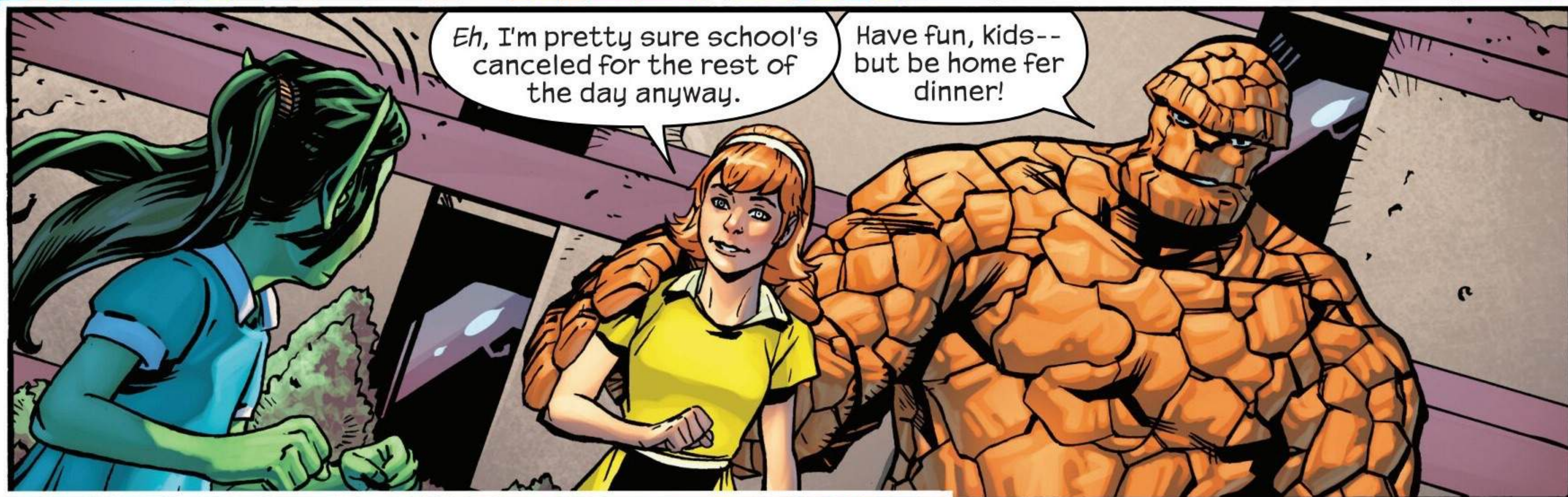
ARR
GGH!

Holy
#%@\$.

Don't swear,
Franklin.

But,
yeah, *holy*
#%@\$.









Reed,
honey, you can't
stay down here
all day.

But he can.
He has.

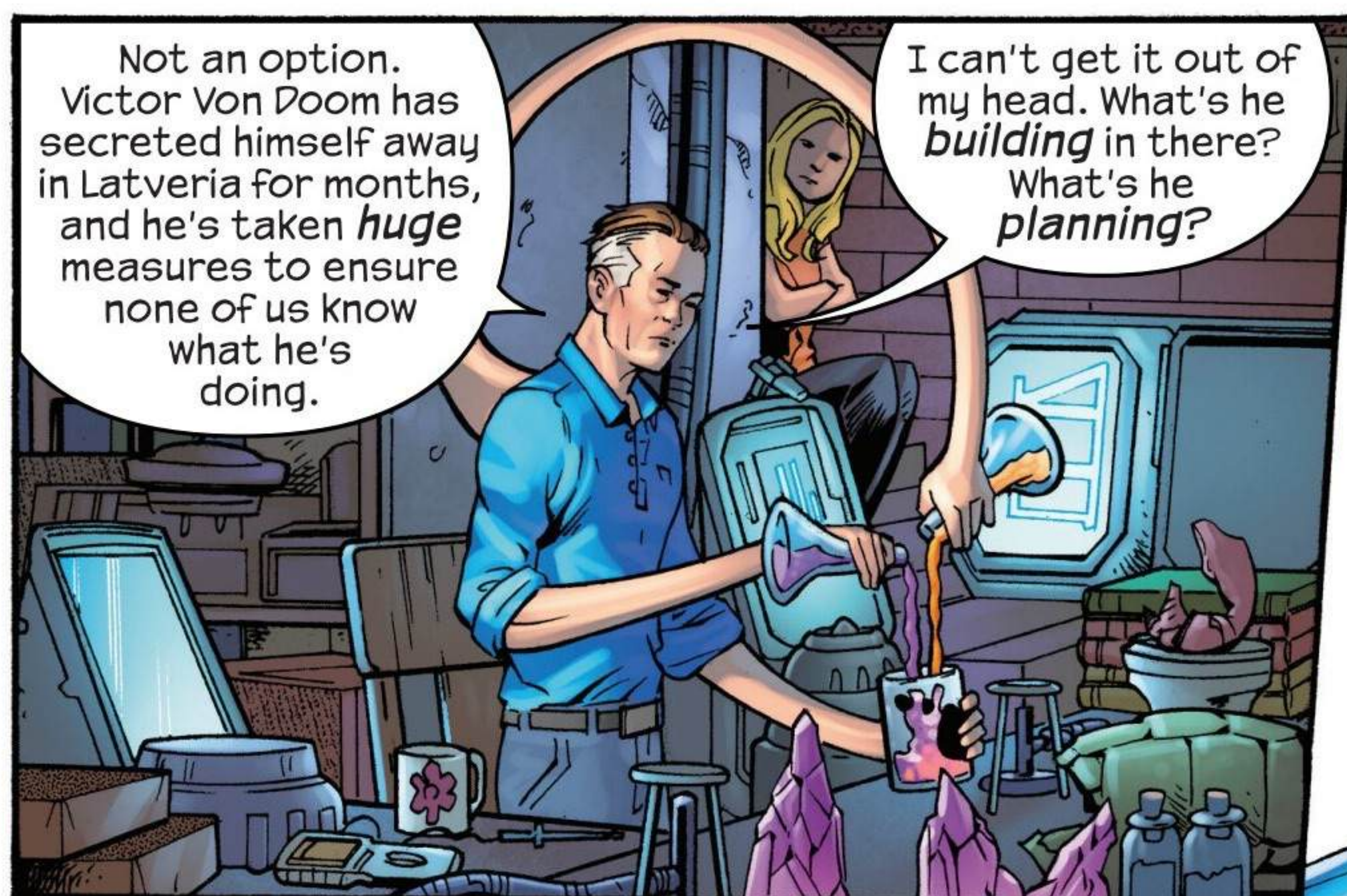


He's been
doing it for
weeks.

I'm at an
impasse, Sue!
Ever since New York,
I've been unable to
progress in my
understanding of
magic.*

So leave
it, honey!
Focus on it
later!

*See *Fantastic Four* #21-22 for more! --Tom



Not an option.
Victor Von Doom has
secreted himself away
in Latveria for months,
and he's taken *huge*
measures to ensure
none of us know
what he's
doing.

I can't get it out of
my head. What's he
building in there?
What's he
planning?



Sigh
Another
null result.



I know that magic is
keeping us out, ergo,
understanding
magic may get
us *in*.

And
you are,
as you say,
at an impasse.
Well, mister,
I've got an
idea.



You and
I are gonna go
visit a *magic*
knight.



Hrm. Perhaps I should fall back to **known** science, mathematics and physics. If I could just determine **how** magic interacts with physical properties, I may be able to--

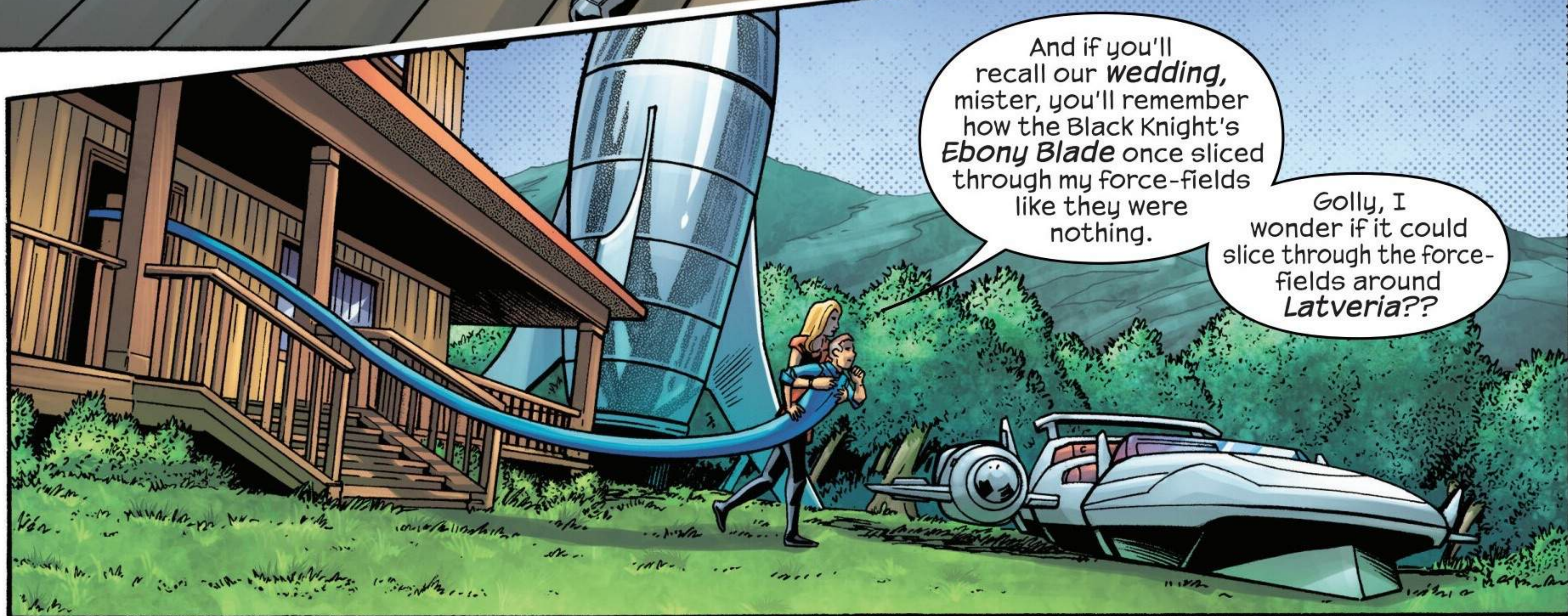
Reed.



You remember the Black Knight, right? A series of magic guys going back to **Camelot**?

Well, did you know the current one, one "**Dane Whitman**," earned a **master's degree** in physics before he assumed the mantle?

He's another man of science, honey--and he's got magic **figured out**!



And if you'll recall our **wedding**, mister, you'll remember how the Black Knight's **Ebony Blade** once sliced through my force-fields like they were nothing.

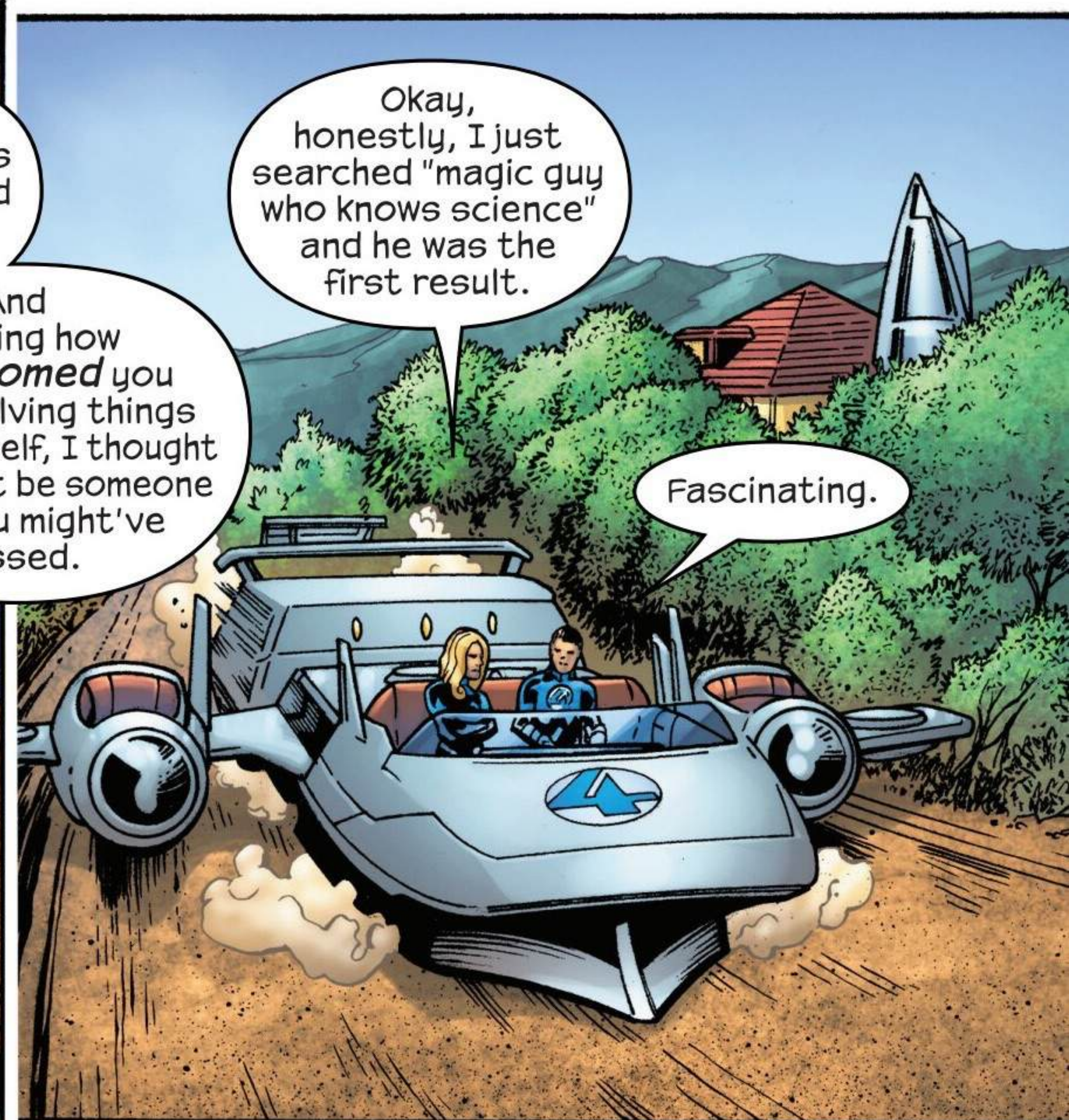
Golly, I wonder if it could slice through the force-fields around **Latveria**??



...You're right. And even if Whitman **hasn't** cracked the problem of magic, his sword **would** be useful. How did you think of him?

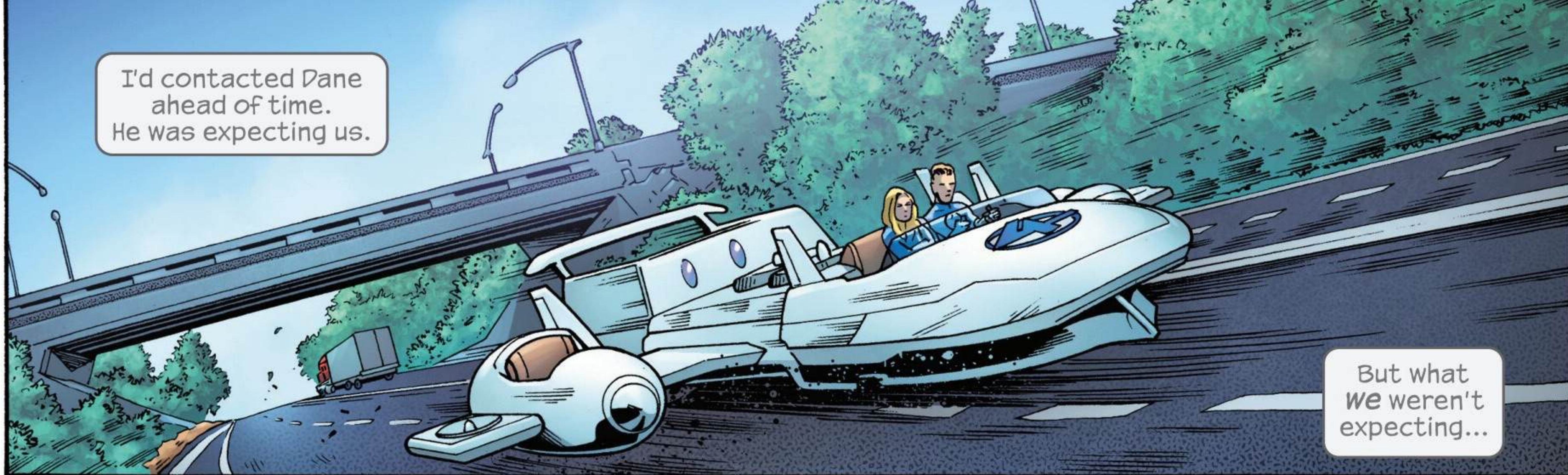
I just saw my husband was stuck and wanted to help him out.

And knowing how **accustomed** you are to solving things all by yourself, I thought there might be someone else you might've missed.



Okay, honestly, I just searched "magic guy who knows science" and he was the first result.

Fascinating.



I'd contacted Dane ahead of time. He was expecting us.

But what **We** weren't expecting...



...was to find him on a *throne*.

Ah, Dr. Storm, Dr. Richards! Please come in!

You'll apologize if I don't get up--the *Ebon Siege* demands my full attention right now.



Ah. "Siege" in the obsolete sense, meaning "throne."

Yeah, well, magic demands a certain *tone* and *register* to work. You like it? I made it myself.

Melted down the Ebony Chalice, Ebony Crown *and* the Ebony Blade to do it!



You *melted down* your Ebony Blade?

Yeah, of course! The thing was *cursed*, Dr. Storm--it fed on *hate*. It gave you strength, but it took your *soul*.

We were hoping to borrow it to gain ingress through the magical dome around Latveria.



Oh. Sorry. But honestly, it's *way* more useful as the *Siege*. See, I sit on this and I can see into hidden truths, other times, all sorts of stuff.

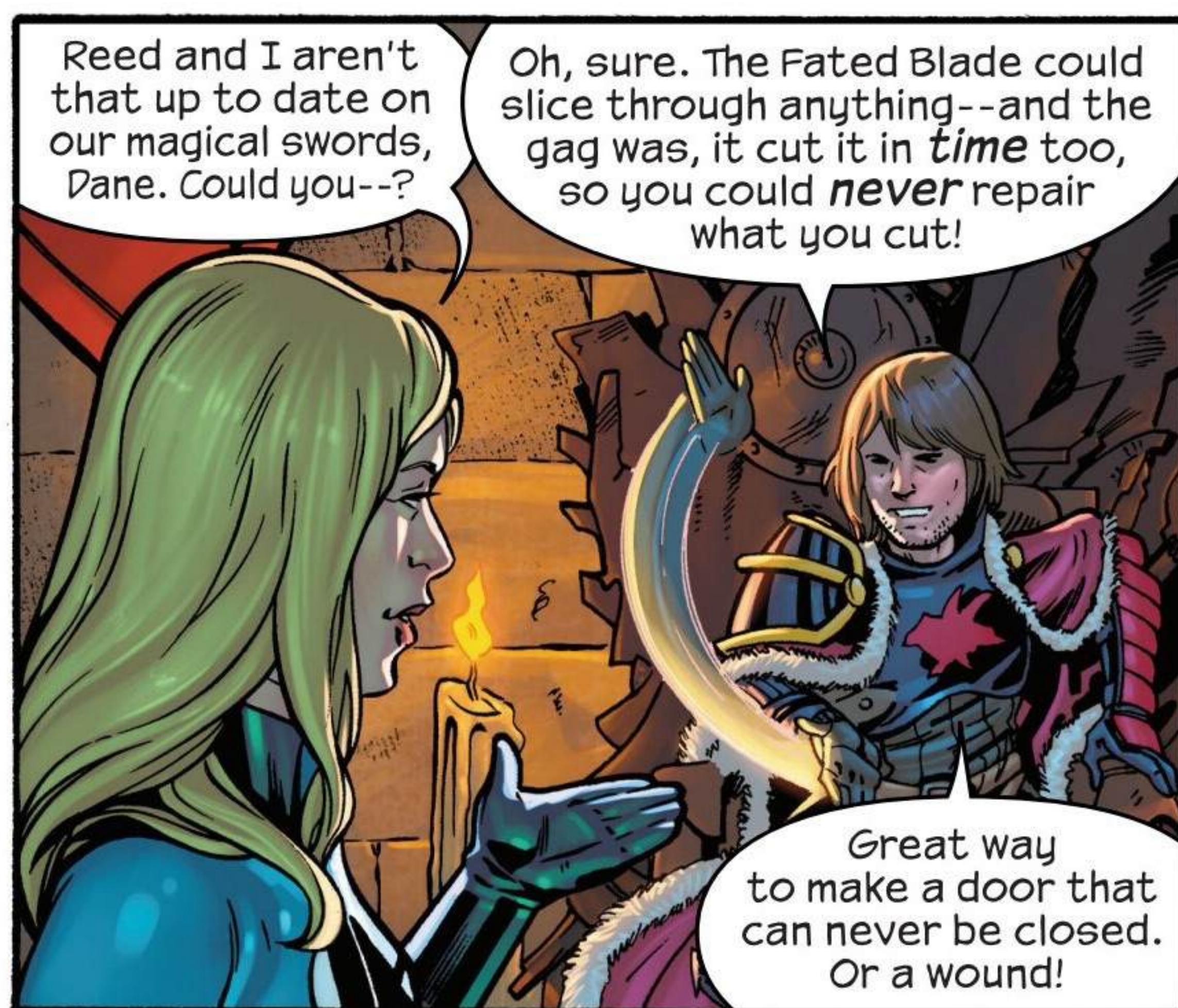
Hey, you wanna try it?



No, thank you, Mr. Whitman.

Please call me "Dane." But hey, if you wanna slice into Doom's dome, I have some good news: There's something even *better* than my old sword for *that*!

What you want, my friends... is the *Fated Blade*.



Reed and I aren't that up to date on our magical swords, Dane. Could you--?

Oh, sure. The Fated Blade could slice through anything--and the gag was, it cut it in *time* too, so you could *never* repair what you cut!

Great way to make a door that can never be closed. Or a wound!



Couldn't help but notice how you switched into the past tense there.

Yeah--the thing disappeared after it was forged in the 1300s--*ages* ago. Time of legends, really. It's *long* gone.

You couldn't find it today if you wanted to!



...

Dane, perhaps it would be more productive if we discussed *physics*, instead of magic swords nobody can find?

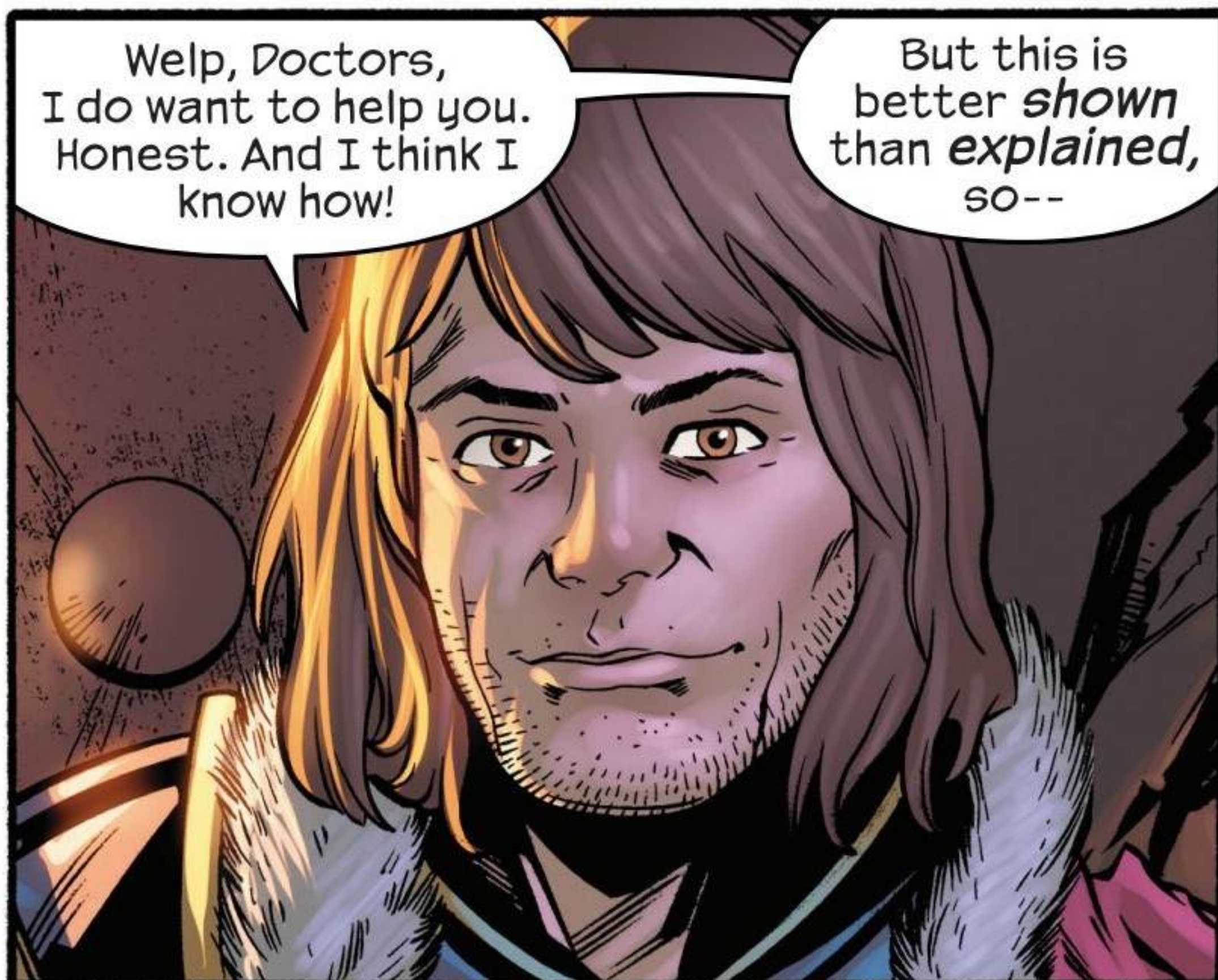
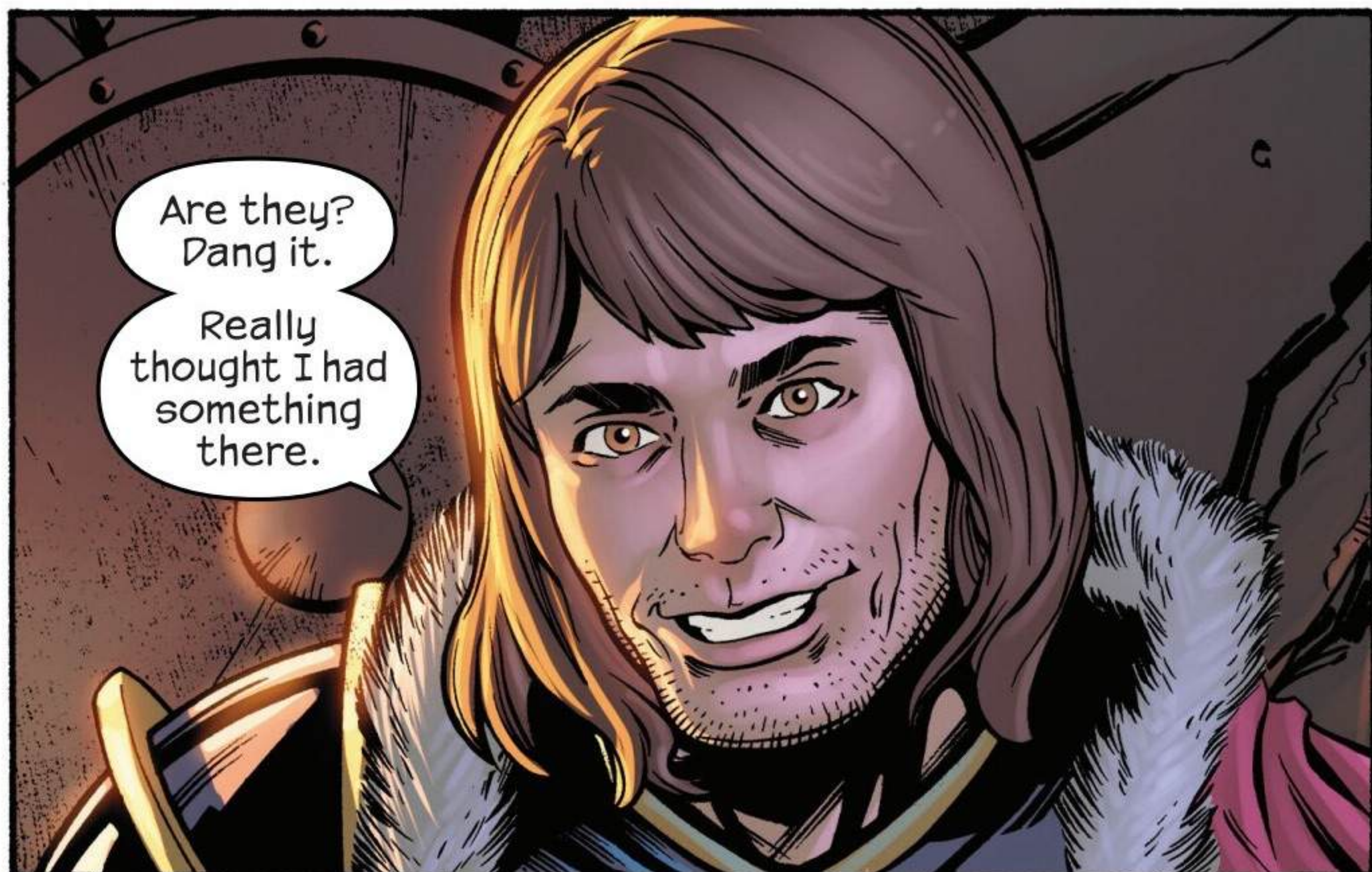
Like you, I'm a man of science. But I've been struggling with reconciling *reproducible facts* with the *nondeterminism* of magic. I've been trying to build a practical theory of--

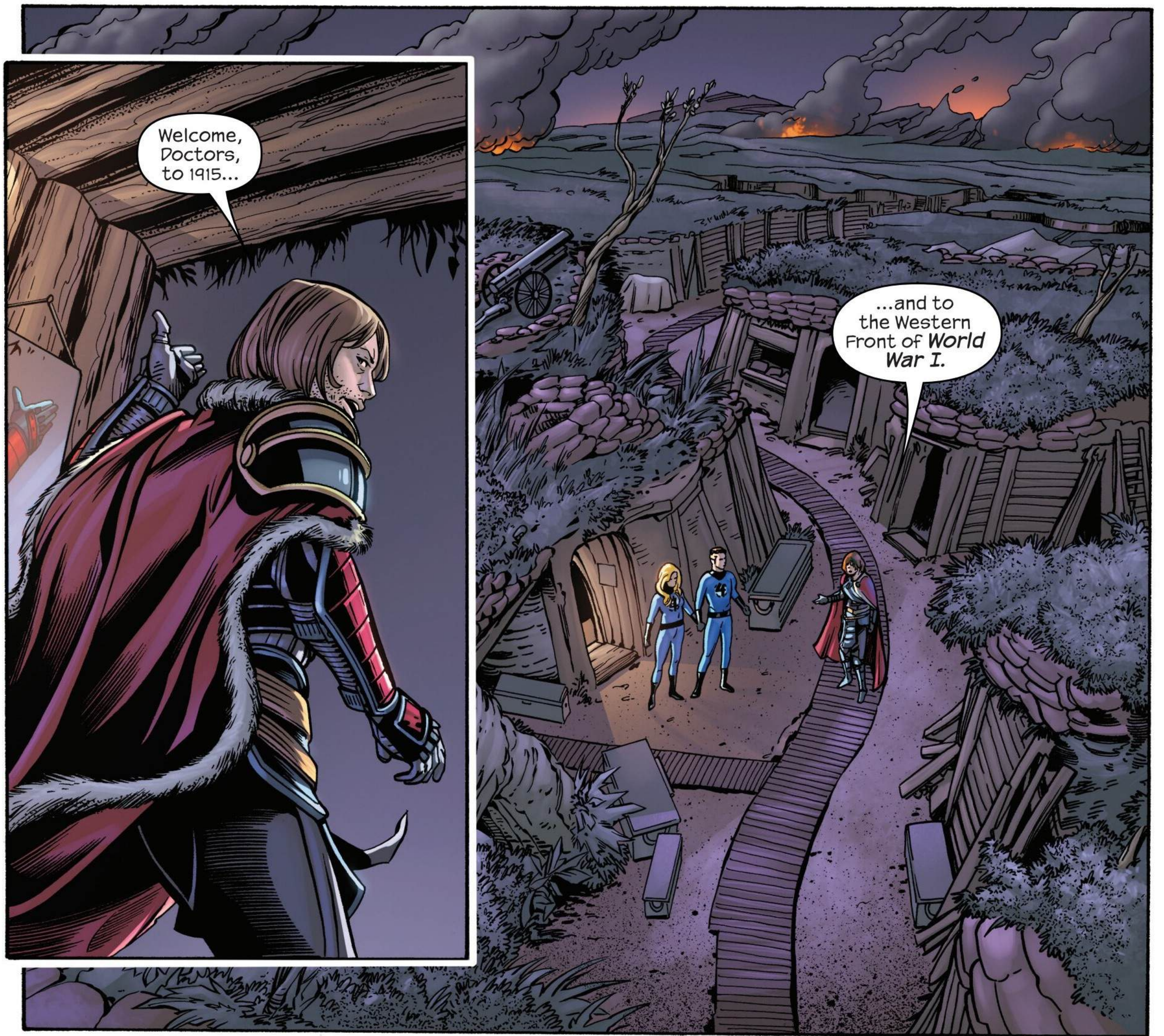
Oh, that's *easy*. Dude, you had trouble with that? Here.



Ta-da!

Magic and physics, together at last!







Dane, we can't *be* here! Our uniforms *alone* will--

Wait. I can't turn invisible!



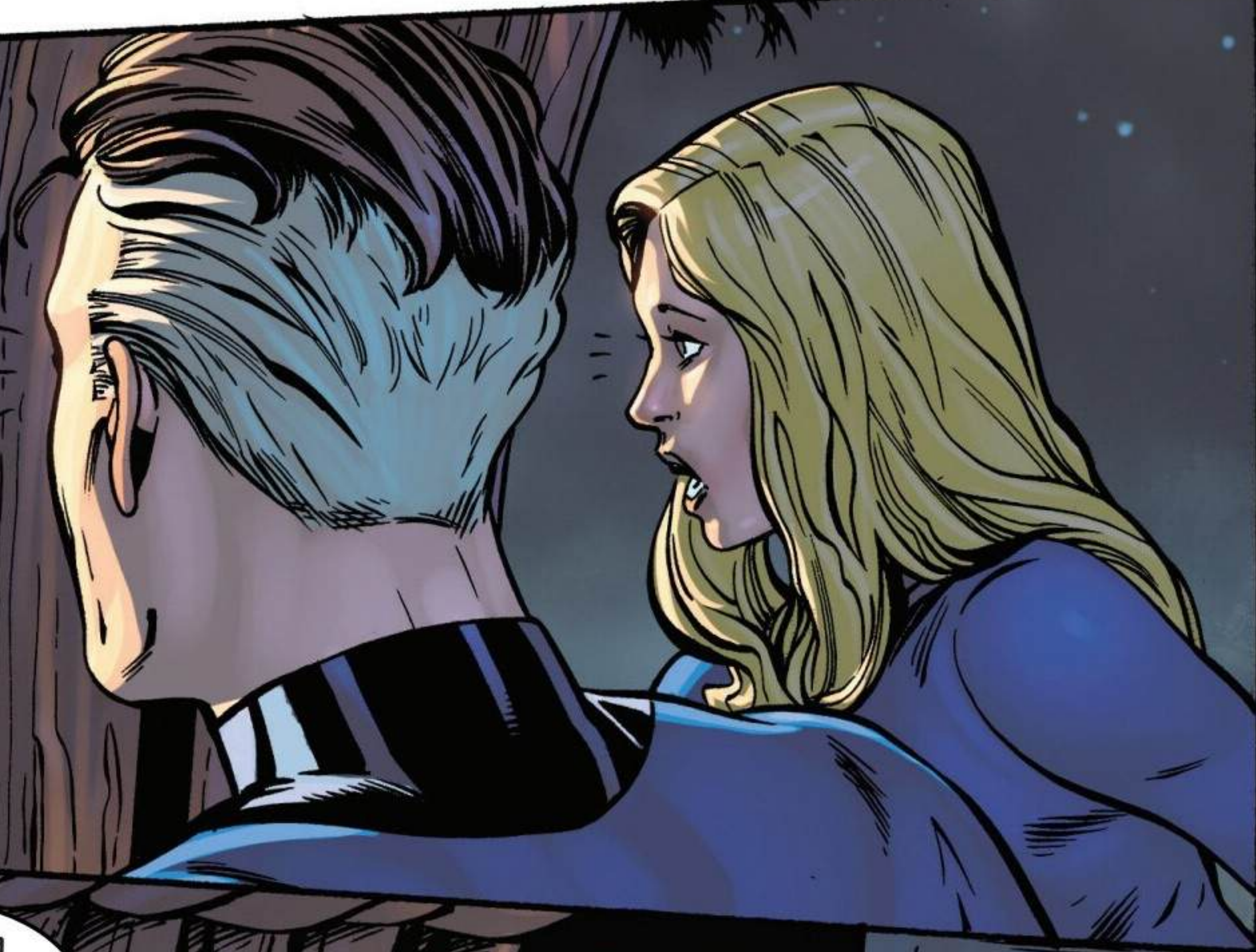
And lemme guess, Reed-- you can't stretch either, right? But it's okay, I promise.

See that mirror in the dugout? Give it a look.



See, *that's* why you don't have any powers: You're not you!

You're *magically possessing* two men, just-- *borrowing* 'em for a bit!



And *I'm* here as a ghost that only you can see! Fun, right? It's like in that leapy show with the quantu--

Dane-- why?

Isn't that clear? The *Fated Blade*, Doctor!



This time-- right *here*, right *now*--was the best chance anyone *ever* had to find the thing.

But nobody did, and after this, it was lost forever!



I mean, it's lost in this time too, of course, but *here* there's still a chance to track it down!

There's a *world war* going on--and that provides certain *opportunities* that weren't there before. Mainly having to do with every authority on Earth being concerned with what's going on here on the front...

...leaving them *less* concerned with what's going on *elsewhere*.



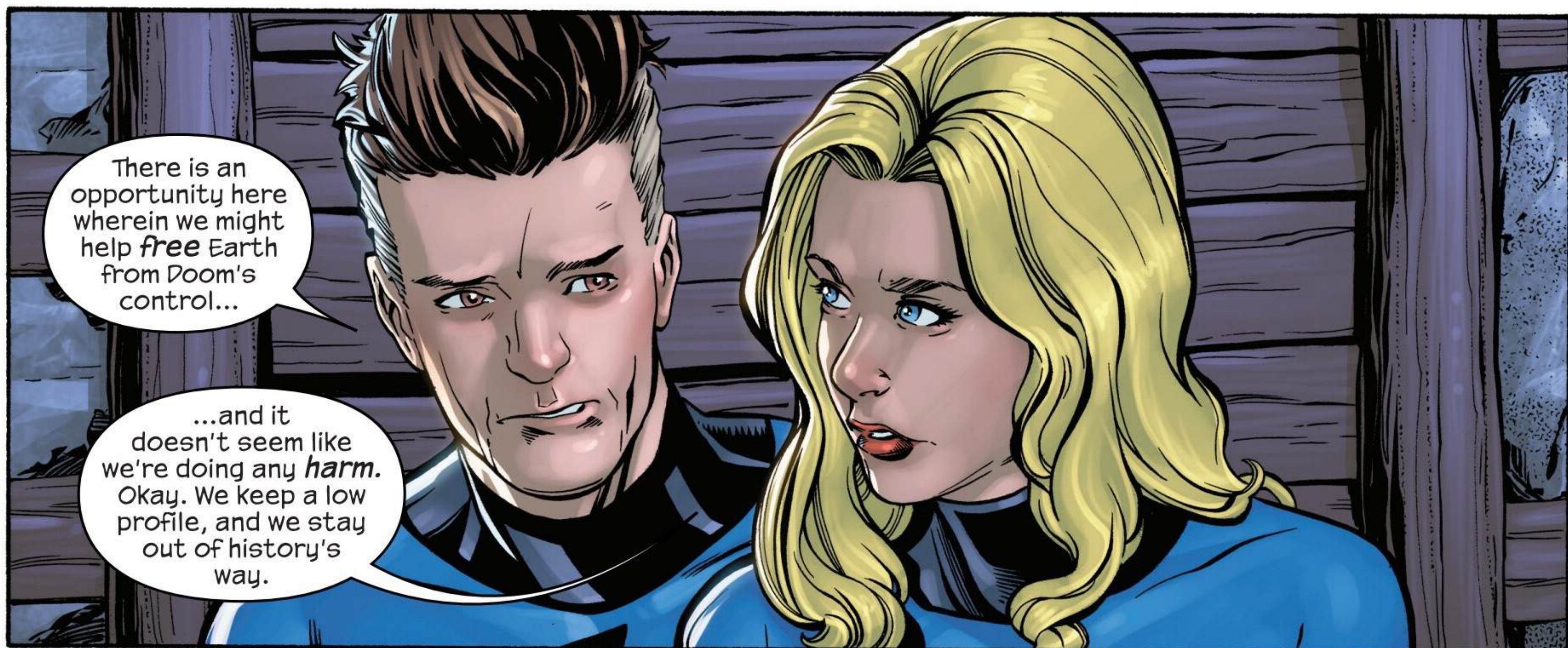
These men we're possessing-- they'll be fine?

Of *course*! Totally fine.



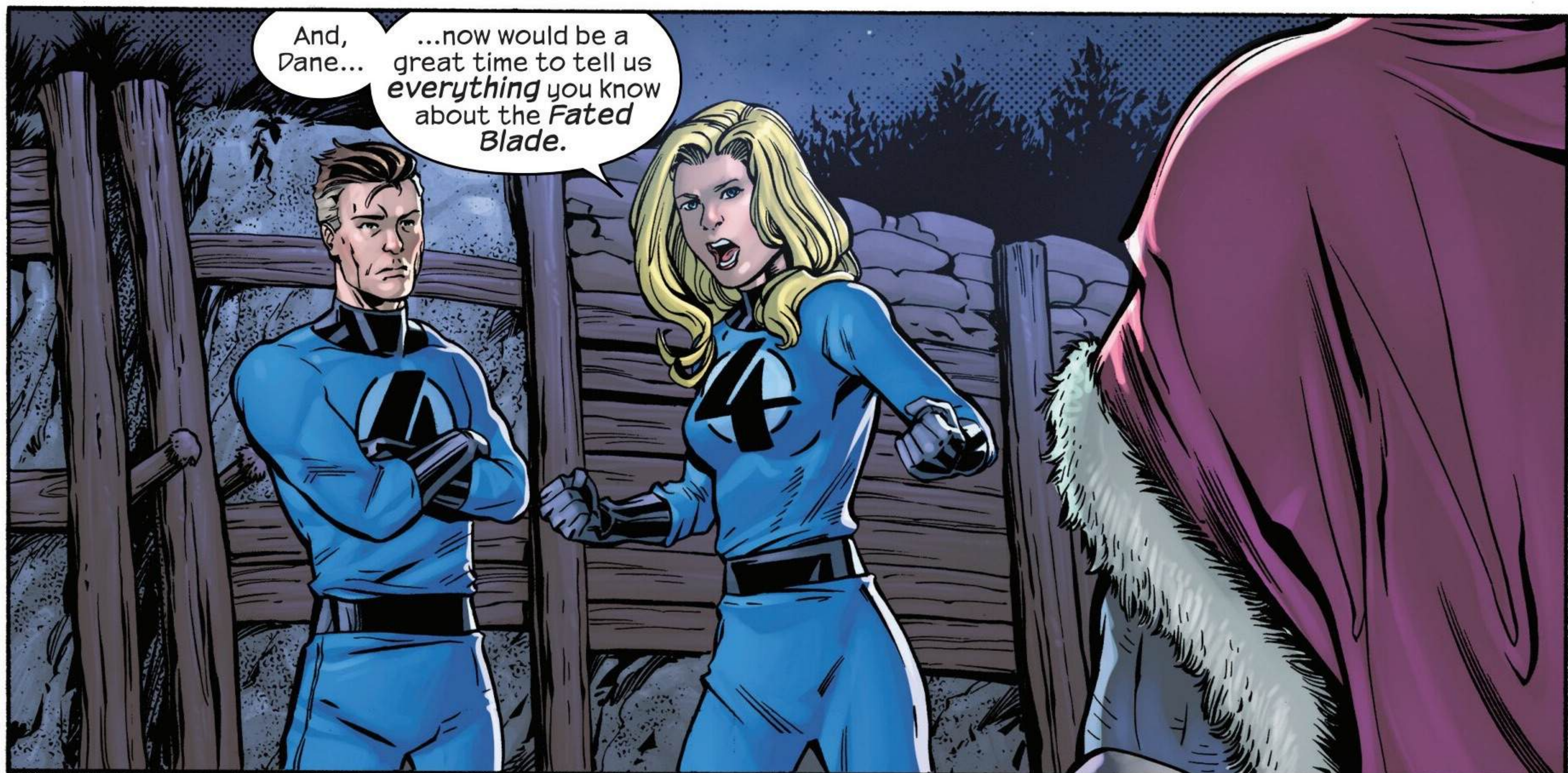
I mean, fine as long as you keep in mind you don't have any powers here and don't jump in front of any bullets or *zeppelins* or anything.

When you're gone, they'll forget all about it--their minds filling in the blanks with just another day at the front!



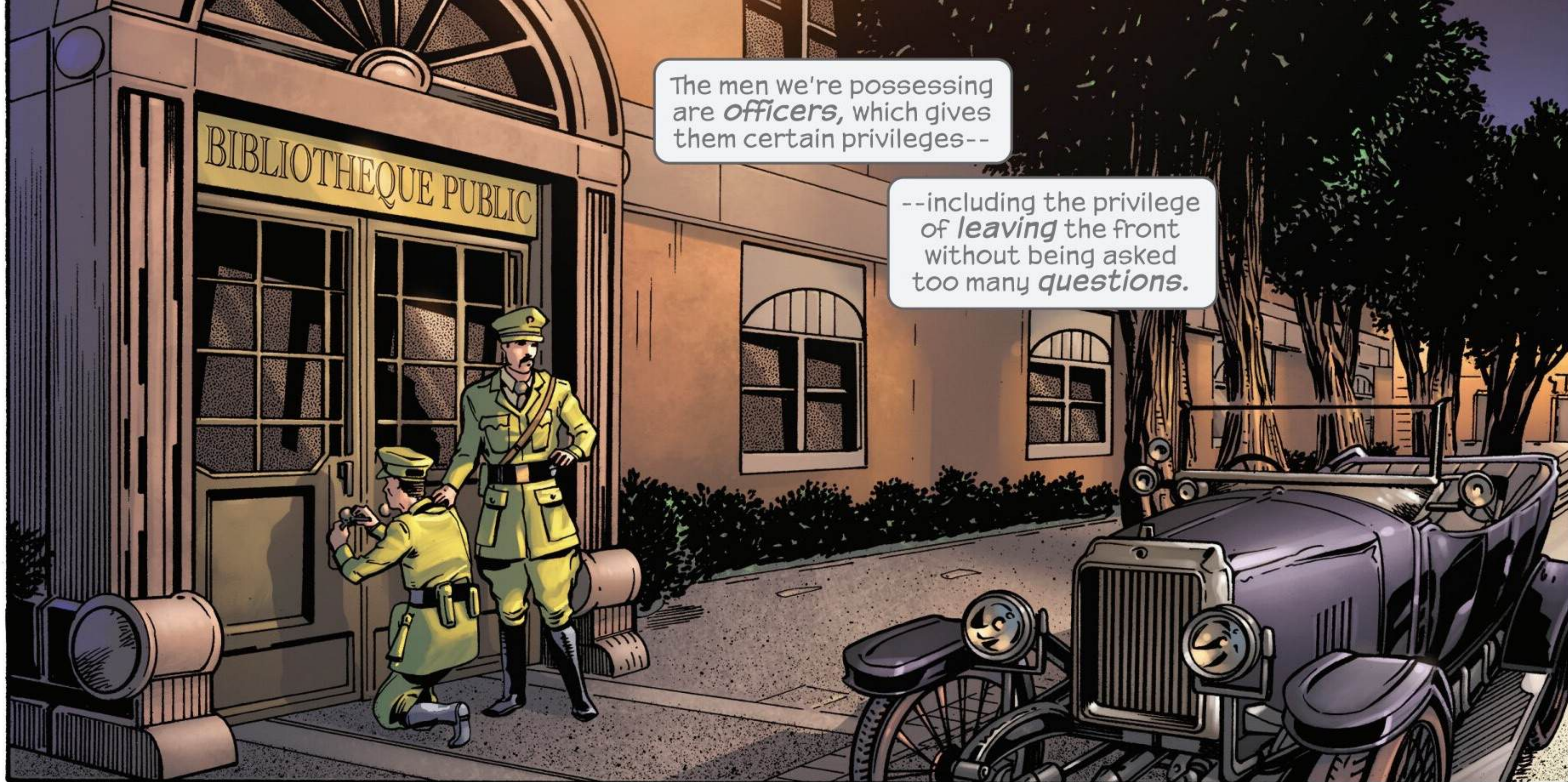
There is an opportunity here wherein we might help *free* Earth from Doom's control...

...and it doesn't seem like we're doing any *harm*. Okay. We keep a low profile, and we stay out of history's way.



And, Dane...

...now would be a great time to tell us *everything* you know about the *Fated Blade*.



The men we're possessing are *officers*, which gives them certain privileges--

--including the privilege of *leaving* the front without being asked too many *questions*.



Dane tells us the legend of the blade--who was said to have forged it, and what history's been recorded.

And so it becomes a problem of *archaeology*.



The key to archaeology is that people in the past were just that: *people*. Their brains were like ours, which meant they made their decisions for reasons *we* can still understand.

Suppose you're looking for a lost city. You start by assuming people built cities *then* for the same reasons *we* do now: for convenience, access to resources and so on.



When you can build a *map* of what a past people's world looked like, you can see where *they* would've logically founded their cities. You put yourself in their shoes, in their world, thinking as they would.

Archaeology is discovery, but it's also *applied empathy*.



And there, in that library--with what's known of the Fated Blade and what we can recover of that long-gone world in which it was *forged*...

...we deduce where its most likely location is.



We're a full decade before any portable metal detectors get invented, but as long as we *disassemble* these ones I made afterward, we should be fine.

You're a genius in any era, Reed. I--



--I've got something.

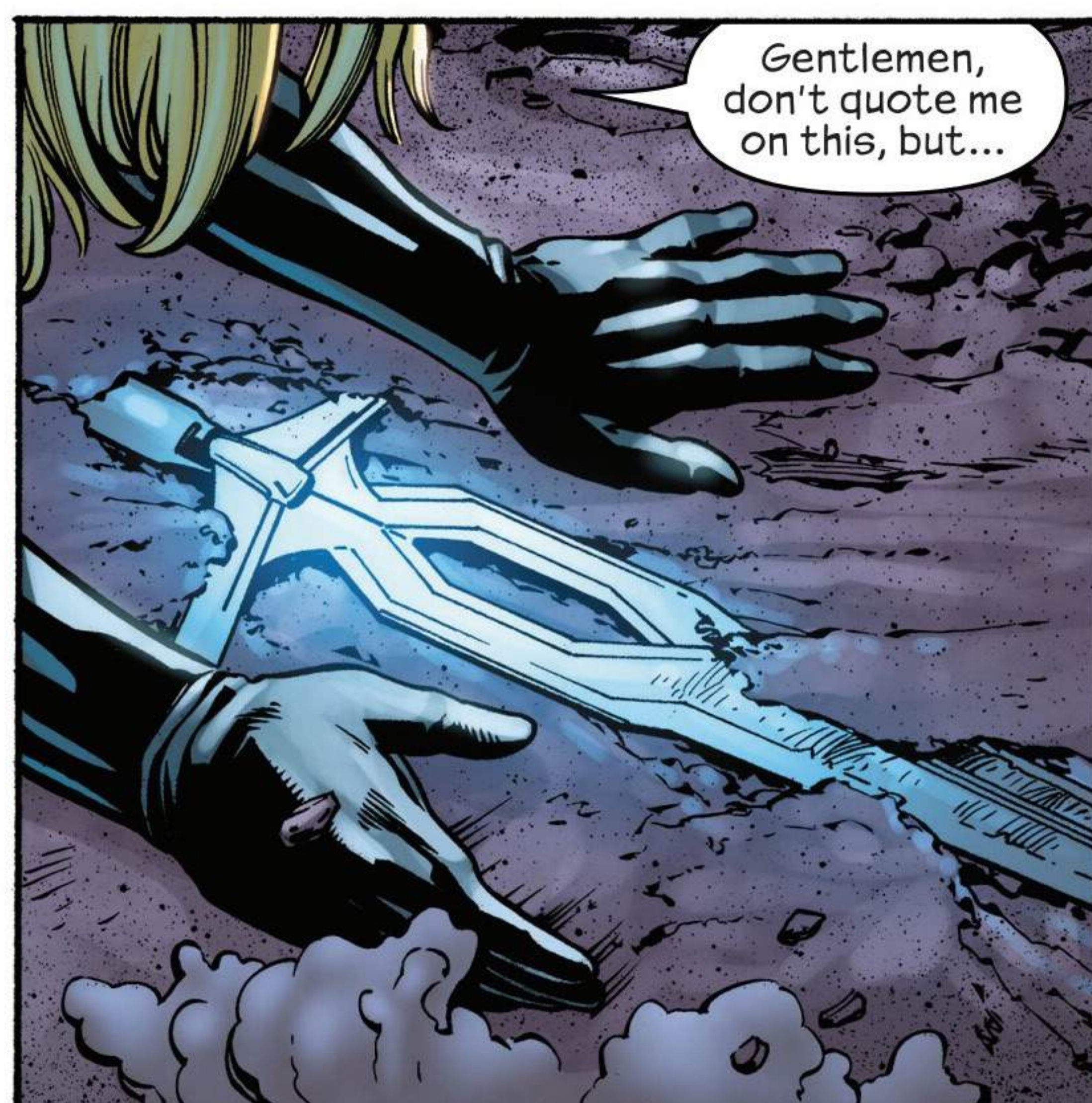


And so, alone in a forgotten field...

TINK!



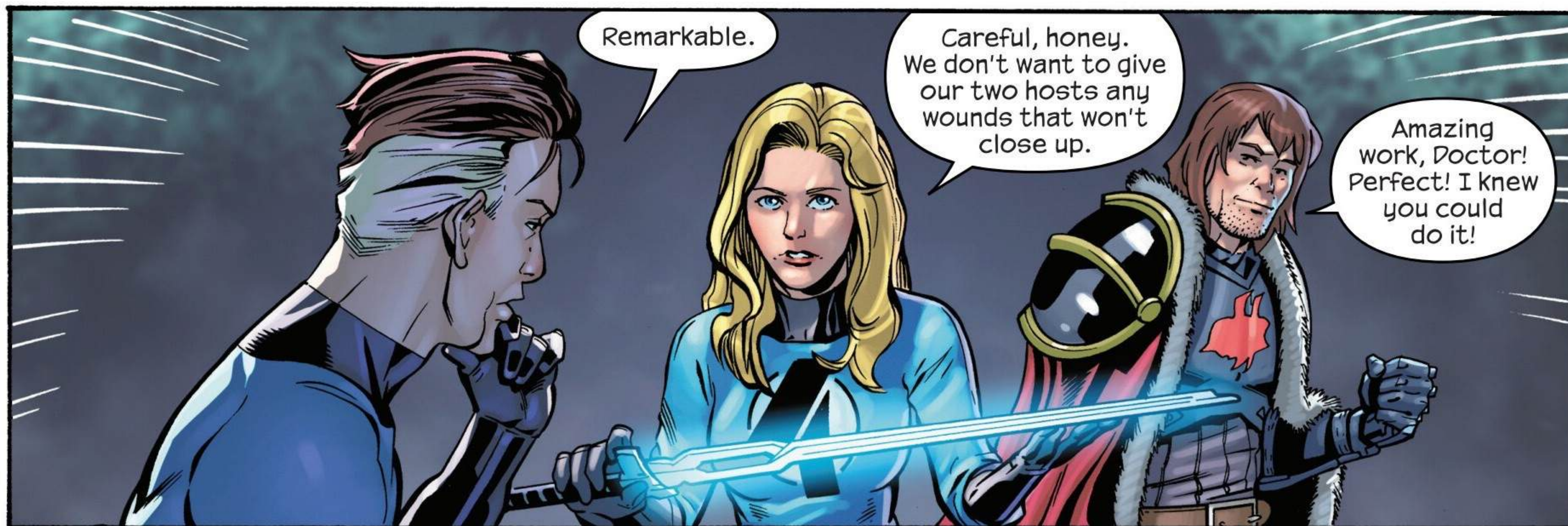
...we dig.



Gentlemen, don't quote me on this, but...



...I believe
we've *found*
that magical blade
we're looking
for.



Remarkable.

Careful, honey. We don't want to give our two hosts any wounds that won't close up.

Amazing work, Doctor! Perfect! I knew you could do it!

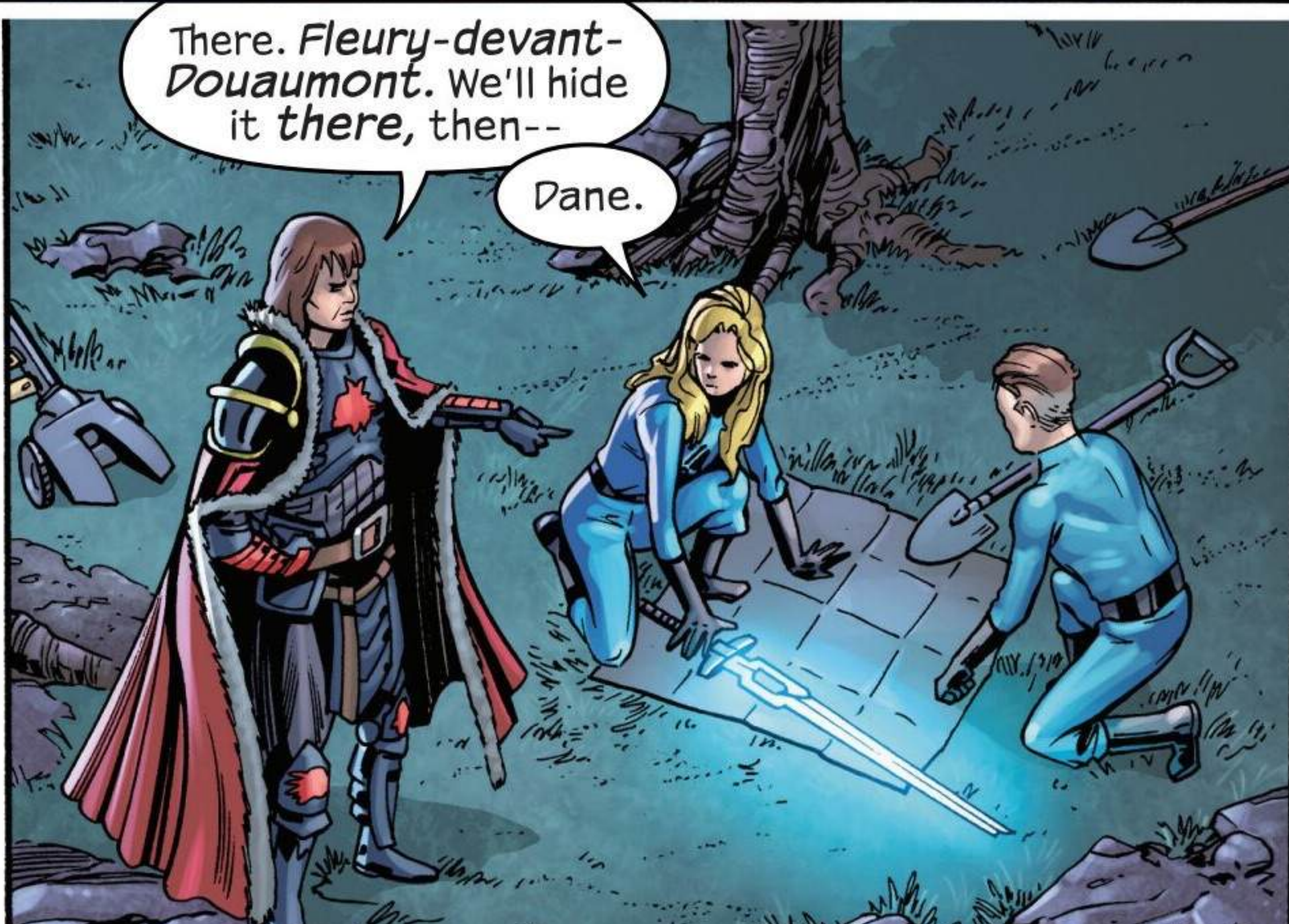
Okay, now that we've *found* the blade here in the past, we can move it someplace where it *won't* be lost, and then go fetch it back in the present!

Sue, can you pull out that map again?



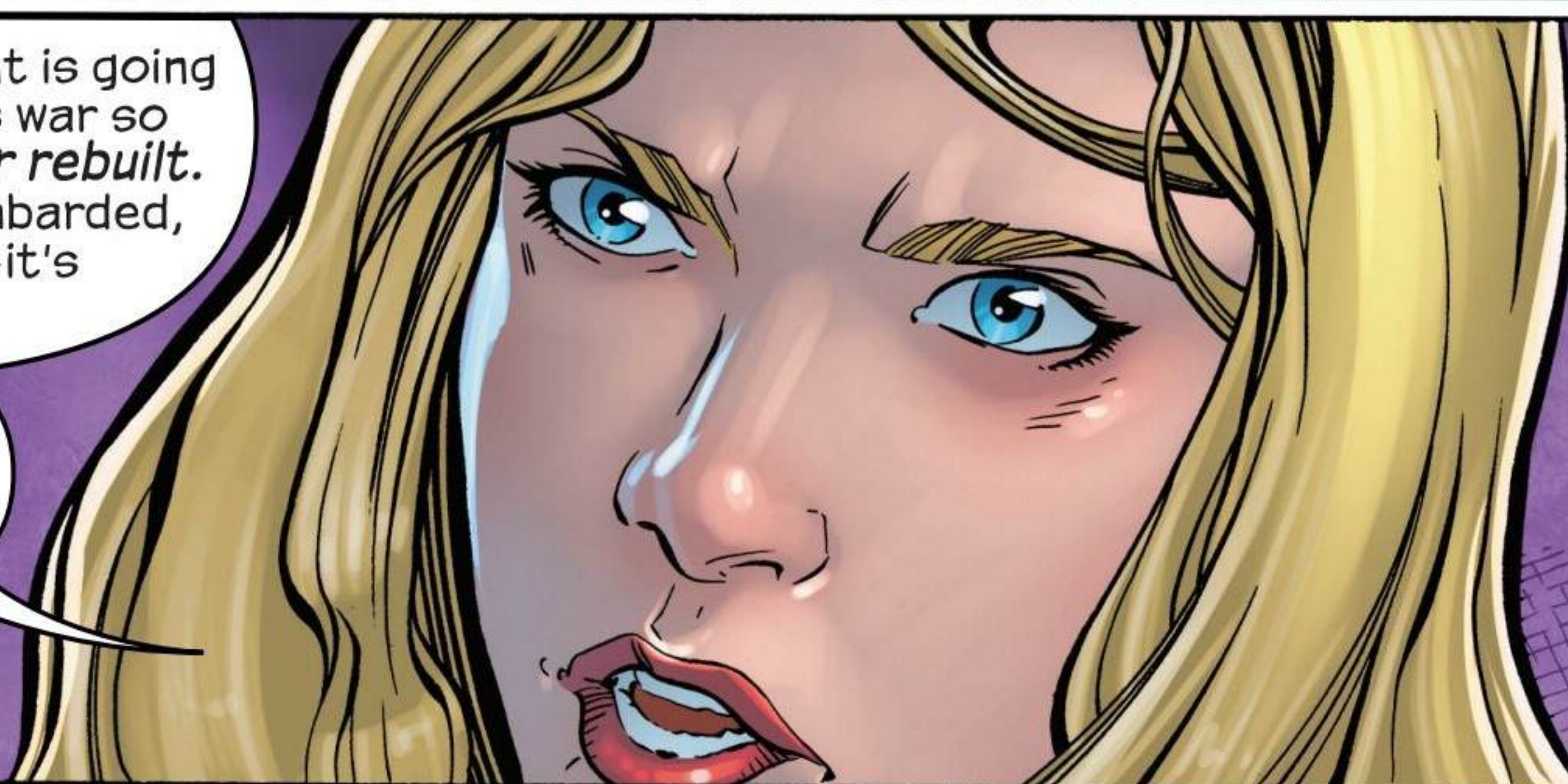
There. *Fleury-devant-Douaumont*. We'll hide it *there*, then--

Dane.



Fleury-devant-Douaumont is going to be destroyed in this war so completely that it's *never rebuilt*. The land is bombed, bombarded, poisoned, burned--it's *obliterated*.

You'd have to expect this *sword* would be too.



Besides, we can't risk these bodies we're *borrowing* by moving the blade across the front. They're not our lives to risk, let alone *sacrifice*.

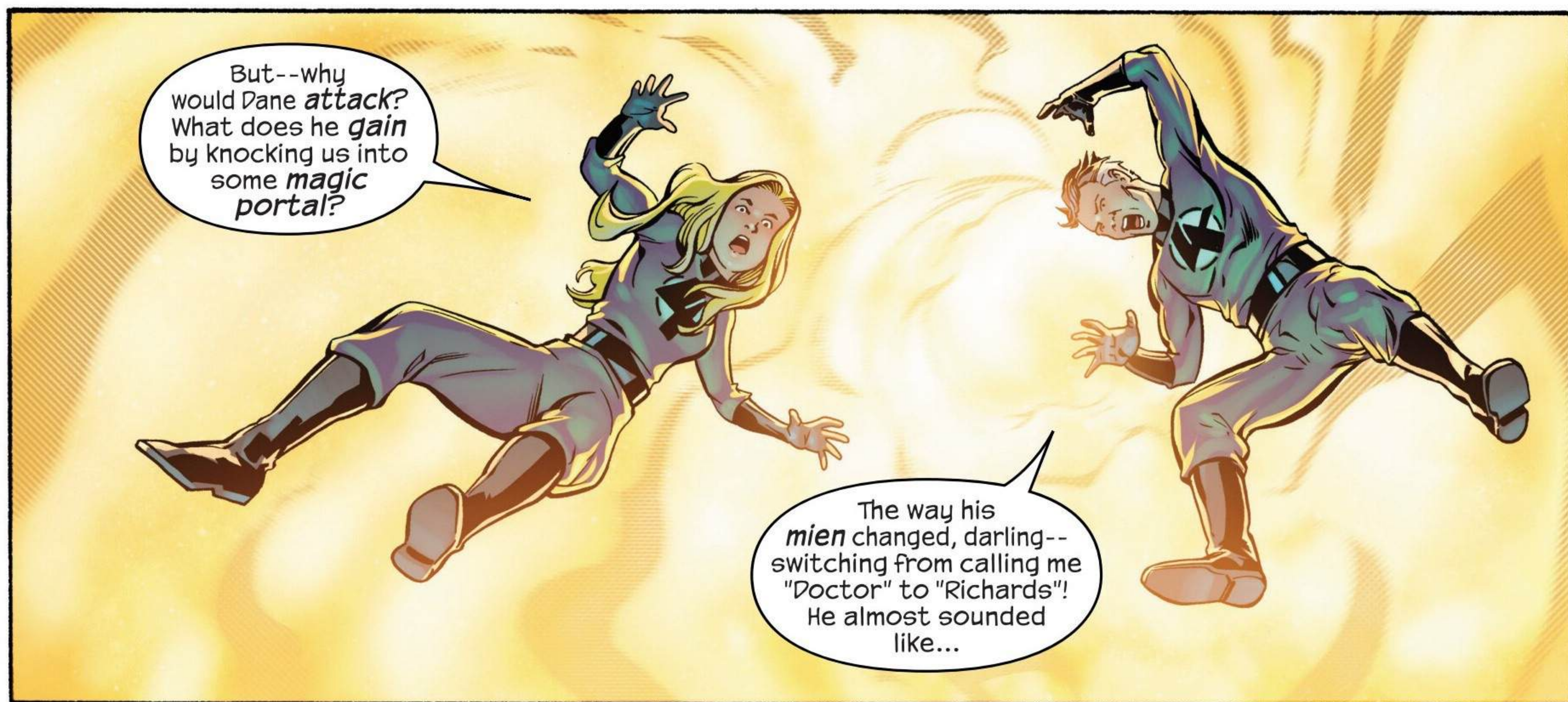
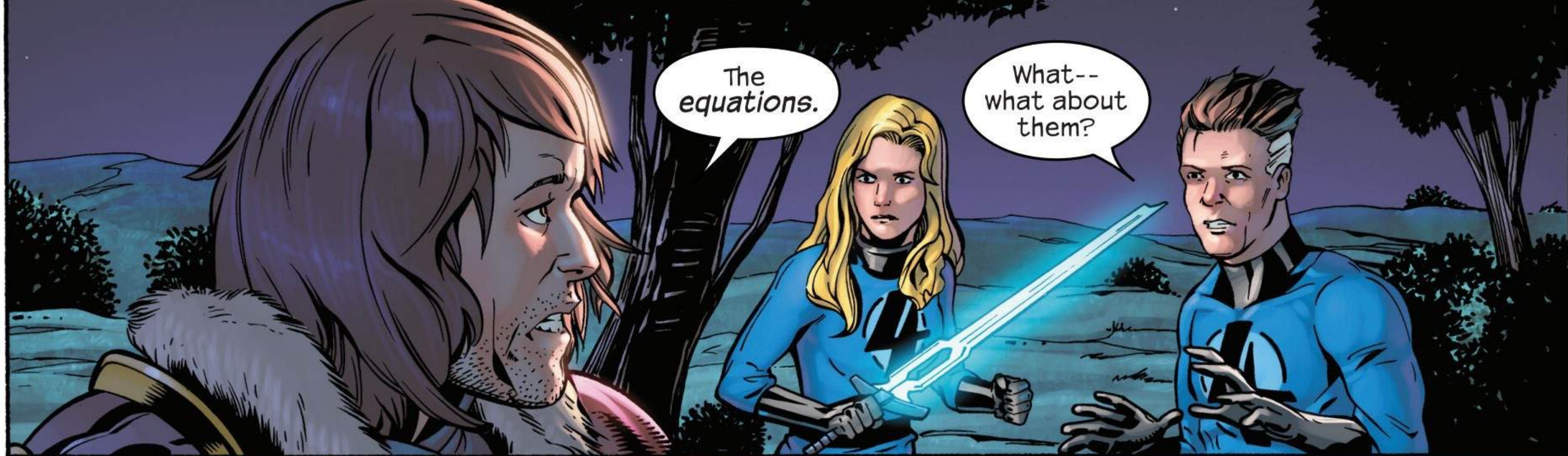
And *how* does moving the blade help us? Surely now that we *know* where it is, we could simply return in the present to get it.



Dane...

...what's really going on here?







...like *Doom*,
Richards.

He almost
sounded
like *Doom*.



Doom, if you don't--

I am *Sorcerer Supreme*, Doctor Storm. There is very little that I "don't." And so much that I now *do*.



"For example, I *influenced* Dane Whitman through his contact with the *Ebon Siege*.



"And he performed *exactly* as I *desired* him to."



There are *magical beings* who have an interest in *protecting* Earth, you know. You learn of them when you become *Sorcerer Supreme*.

Some even lived here, on the Astral Plane, thinking they were safe to *move against* Doom.

And so they forged a weapon that could *kill* me.



I destroyed them, of course, but not before they *hid* that magical blade from my sight--somewhere in Earth's past, where it would lie waiting for someone to *find* it--and *wield* it against me.

It was... *intolerable*.

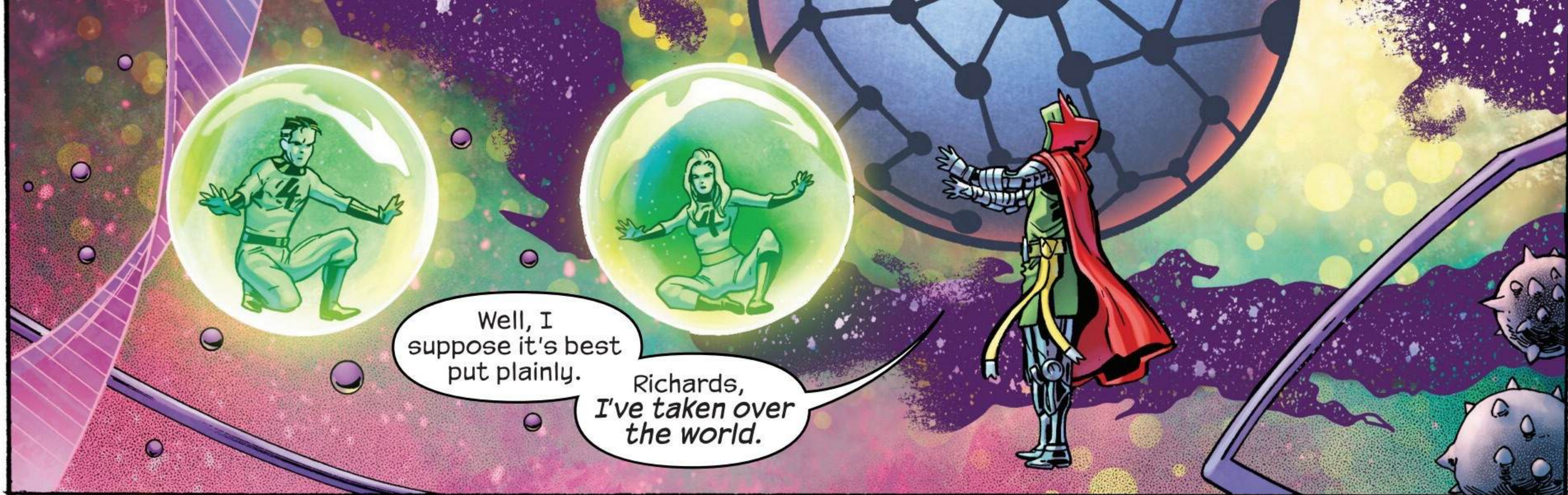


And so you sent *us* into the past, looking for it. And I...

...I *found* it for you.

Yes, Doctor. You have been so *useful*.





Well, I suppose it's best put plainly.

Richards, I've taken over the world.



I did want you to know that, before I killed you.

A final gift, so that you might truly understand the *depth* and *breadth* of your loss.



I push against the magical sphere crushing me with all my might-- but it's *no good*.

ARRRGHH!!

ARGGGHHH!

This is the Astral Plane--Doom's *home turf*. My powers can't stop him here.



And then I realize--those strange moments with Dane! Could they have been him *fighting back* against Doom's control? Trying to *warn* us?

I don't know if it's *possible*, and I don't know if it's *true*--

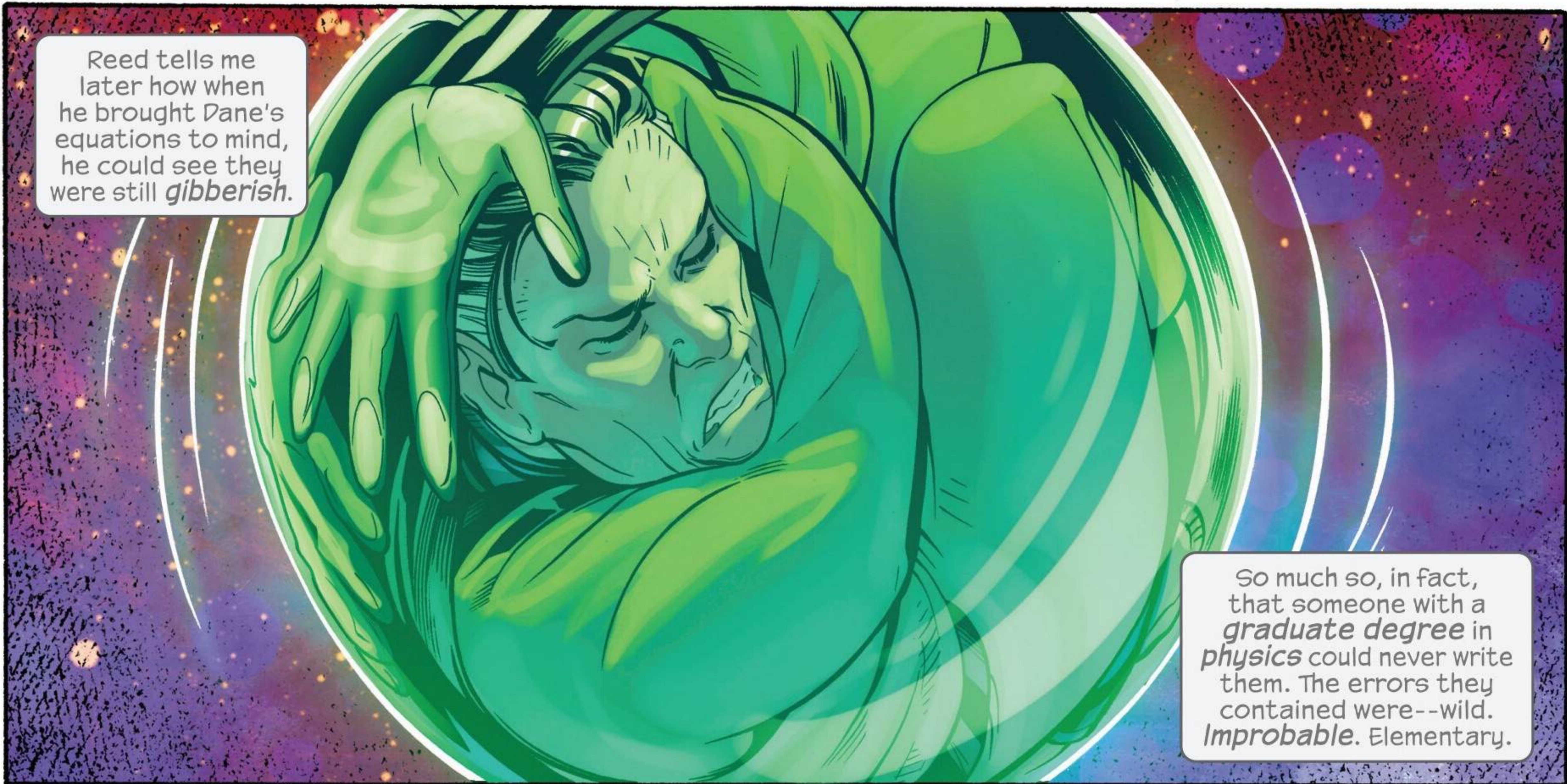
RRGGGGGGHHH...!



--but I know who could figure it out.

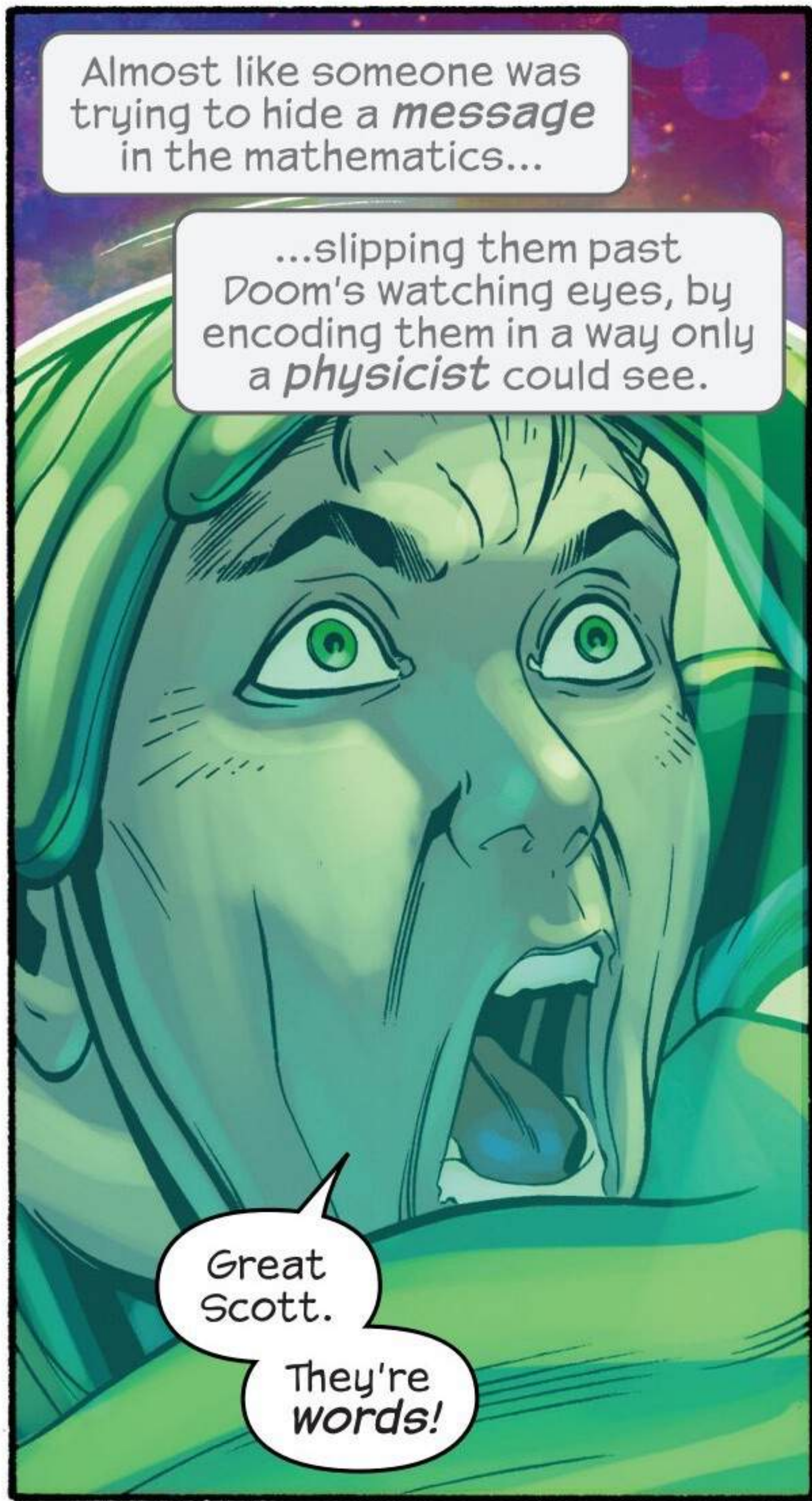
R-REED!

The EQUATIONS!



Reed tells me later how when he brought Dane's equations to mind, he could see they were still *gibberish*.

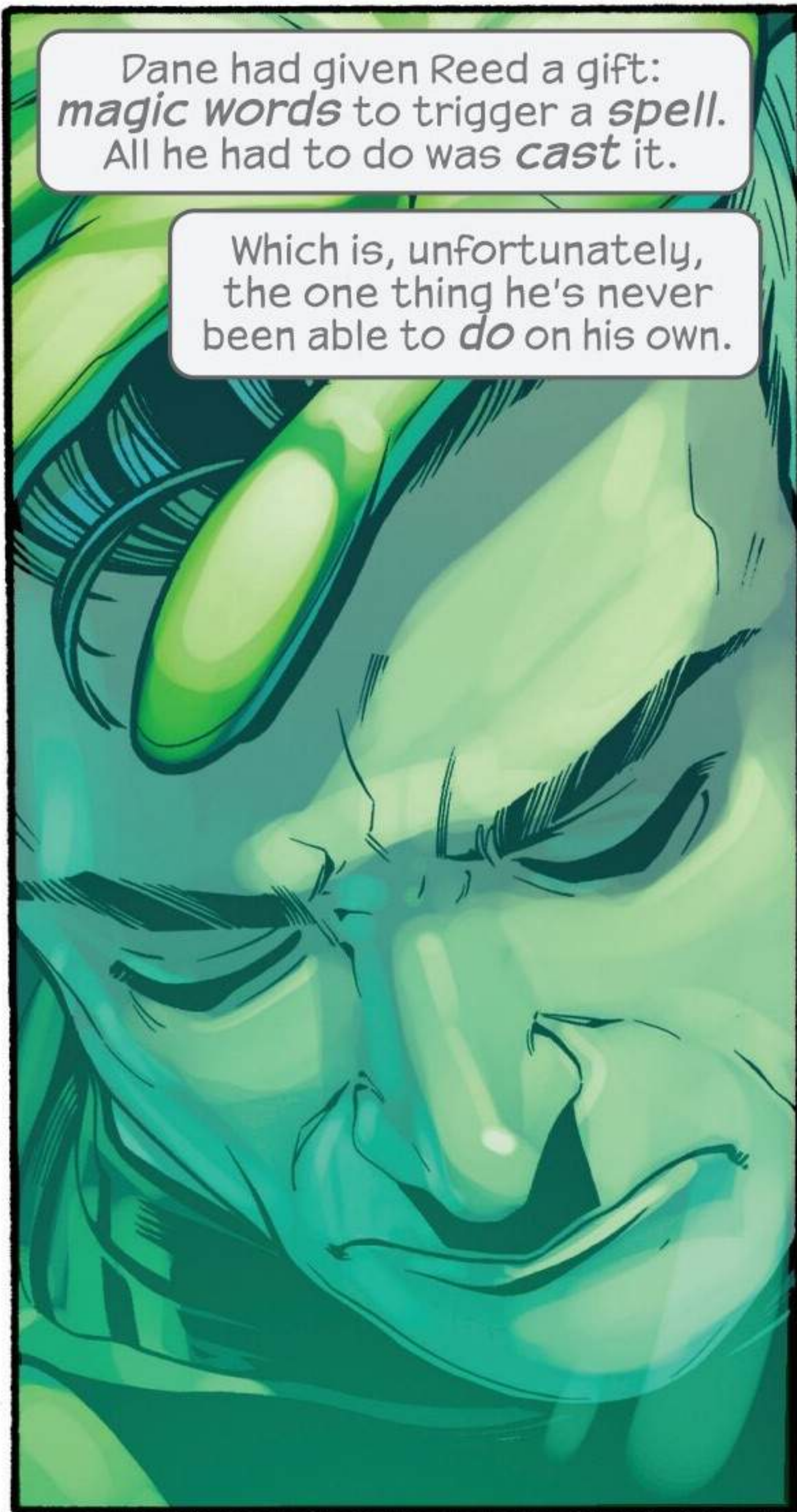
So much so, in fact, that someone with a *graduate degree* in *physics* could never write them. The errors they contained were--wild. *Improbable*. Elementary.



Almost like someone was trying to hide a *message* in the mathematics...

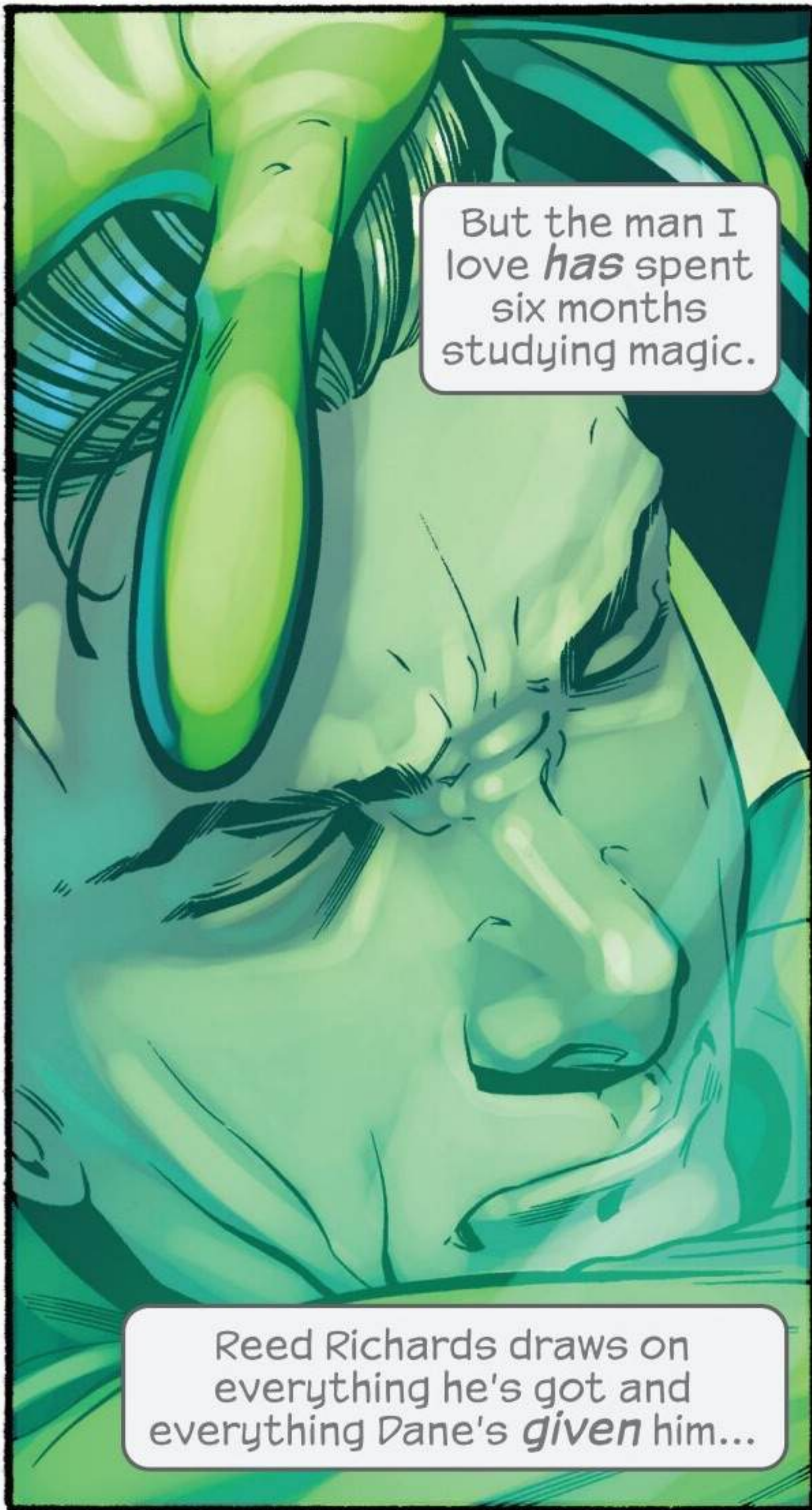
...slipping them past Doom's watching eyes, by encoding them in a way only a *physicist* could see.

Great Scott.
They're *words*!



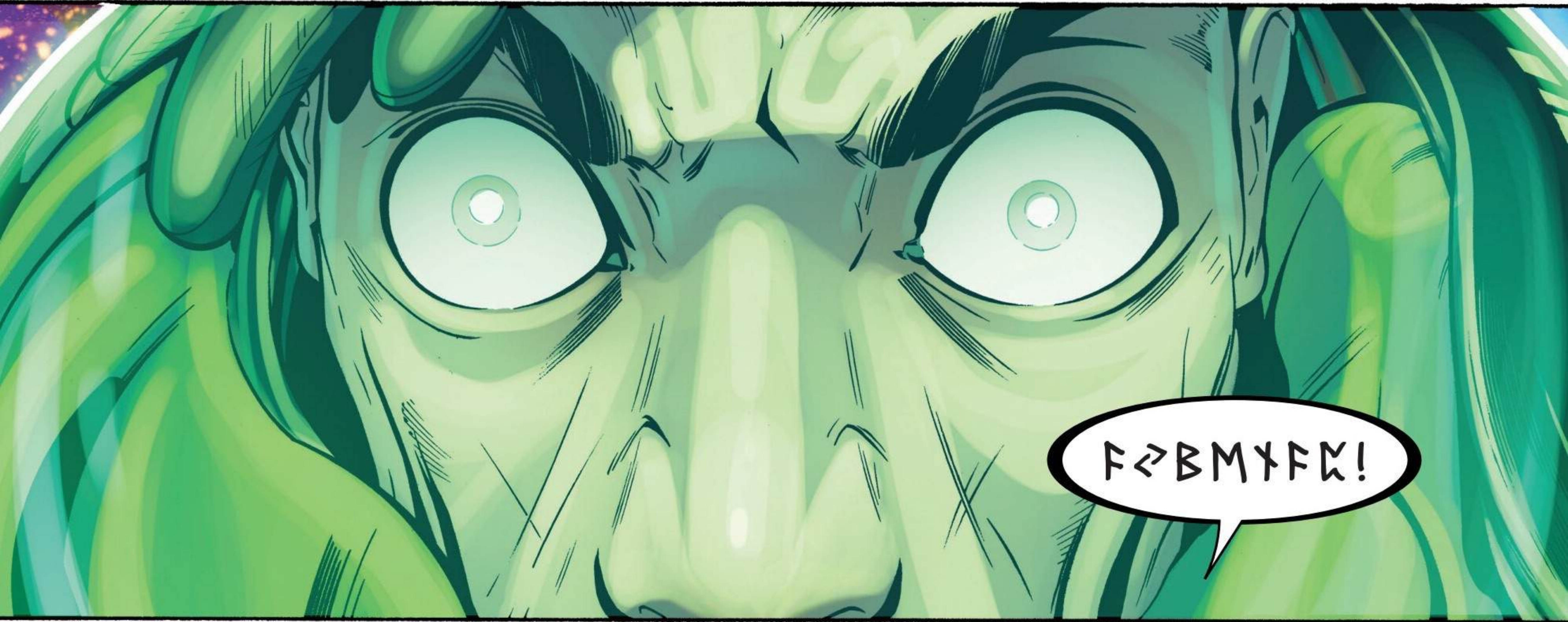
Dane had given Reed a gift: *magic words* to trigger a *spell*. All he had to do was *cast* it.

Which is, unfortunately, the one thing he's never been able to *do* on his own.



But the man I love *has* spent six months studying magic.

Reed Richards draws on everything he's got and everything Dane's *given* him...



F&BMYFN!



...and he *sends* us home.



Hah! *That* is the best you could *manage*, Richards?

I leave you alone for *half a year*, and in all that time, all you *learn* is how to *run* and *cower* like a *wounded dog*??



Incredible.

The Fantastic Four truly *are* useless.



We arrive back in New York City. Reed just cast his first spell--with help, of course, and it'll take more study, more work, to do it again...

...but it's a huge milestone.



Unfortunately, now there's *no chance* for that further study.

There's no more time for *any* of us.

For *DOOM*
has come
to *Earth*.



CONTINUED IN
ONE WORLD UNDER
DOOM



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ALEXANDER LOZANO



#23 DISCO DAZZLER VARIANT BY
BENJAMIN SU



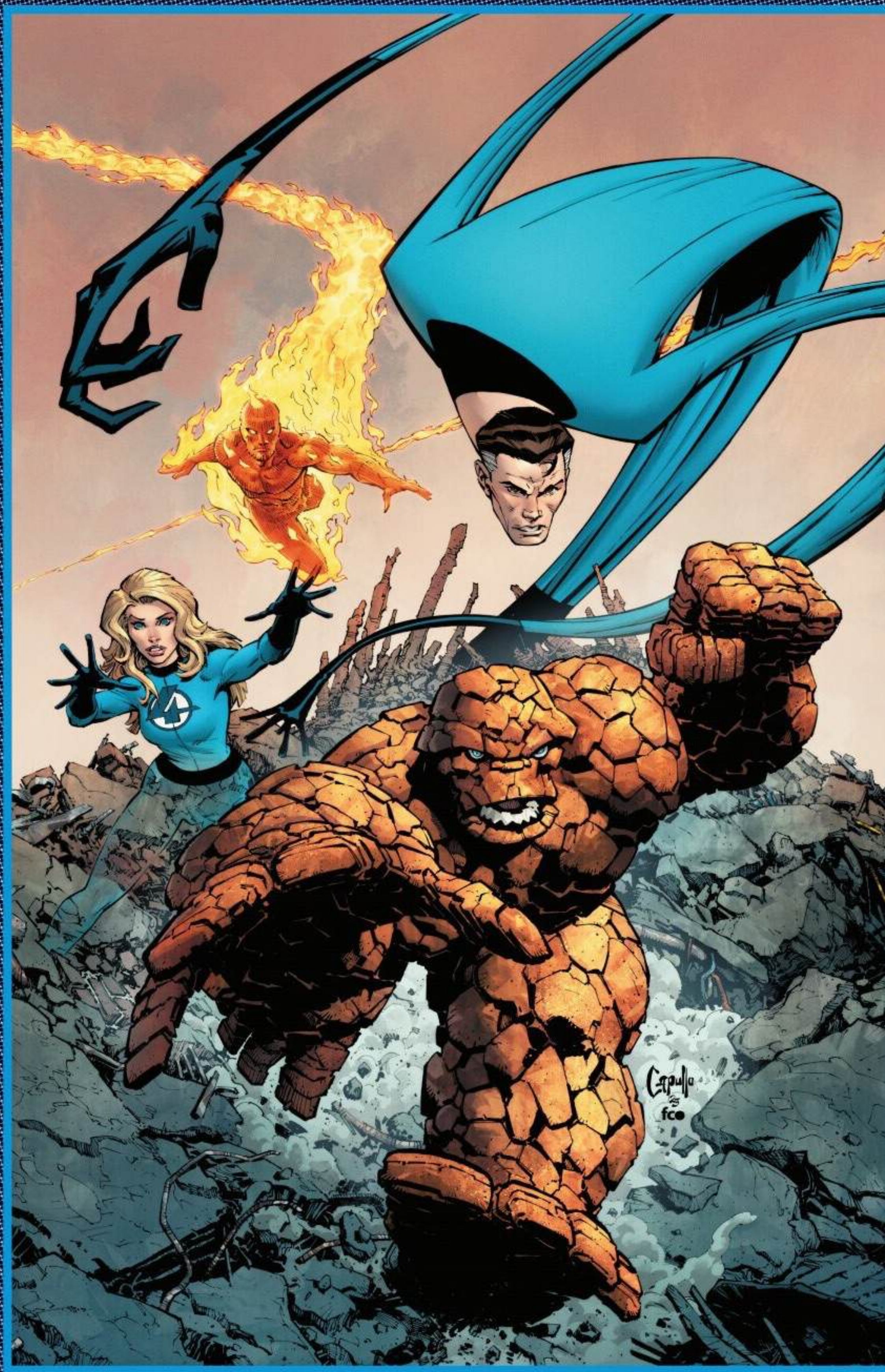
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#24 STORMBREAKERS VARIANT BY
CHRIS ALLEN & GURU-eFX



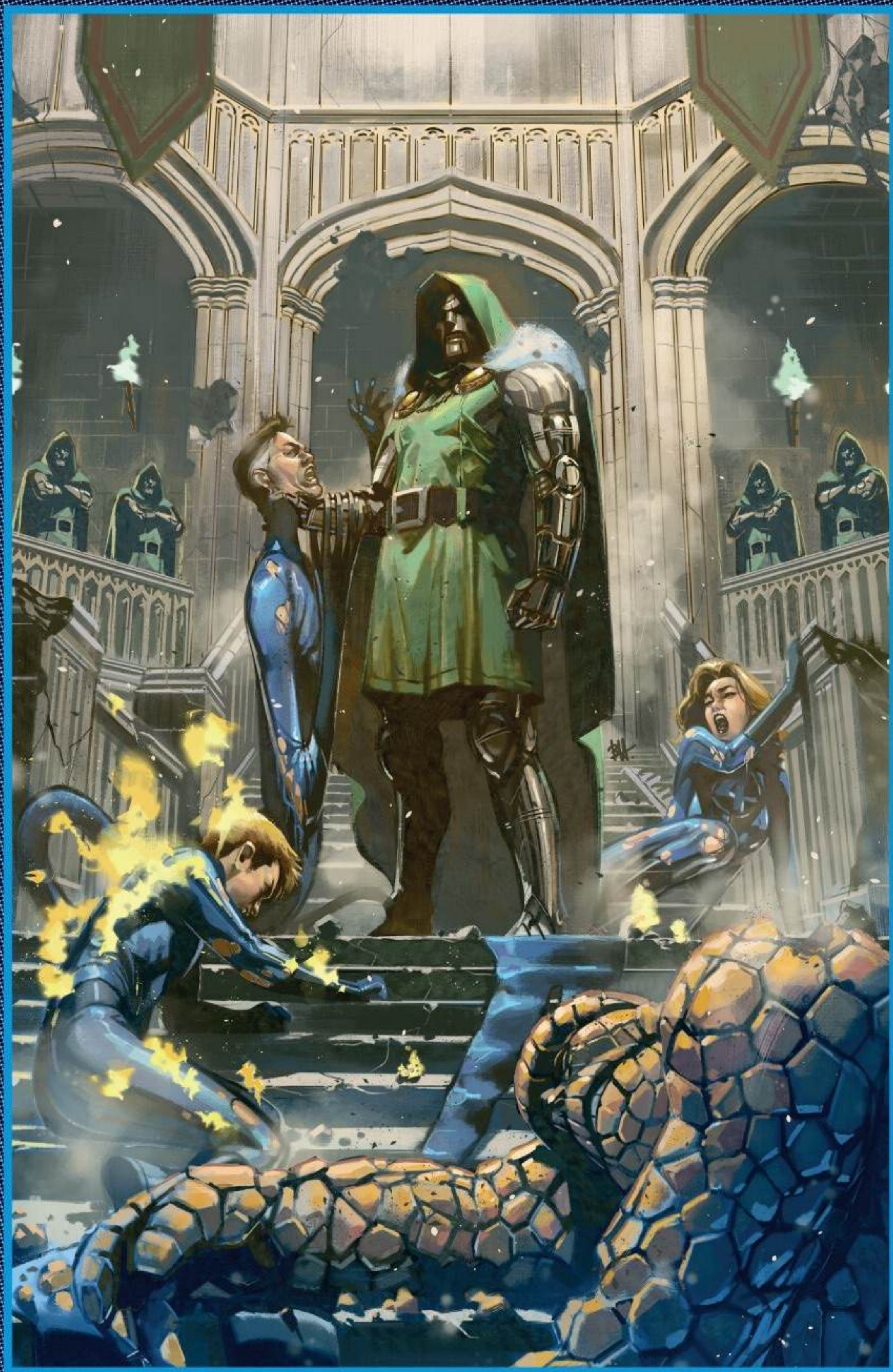
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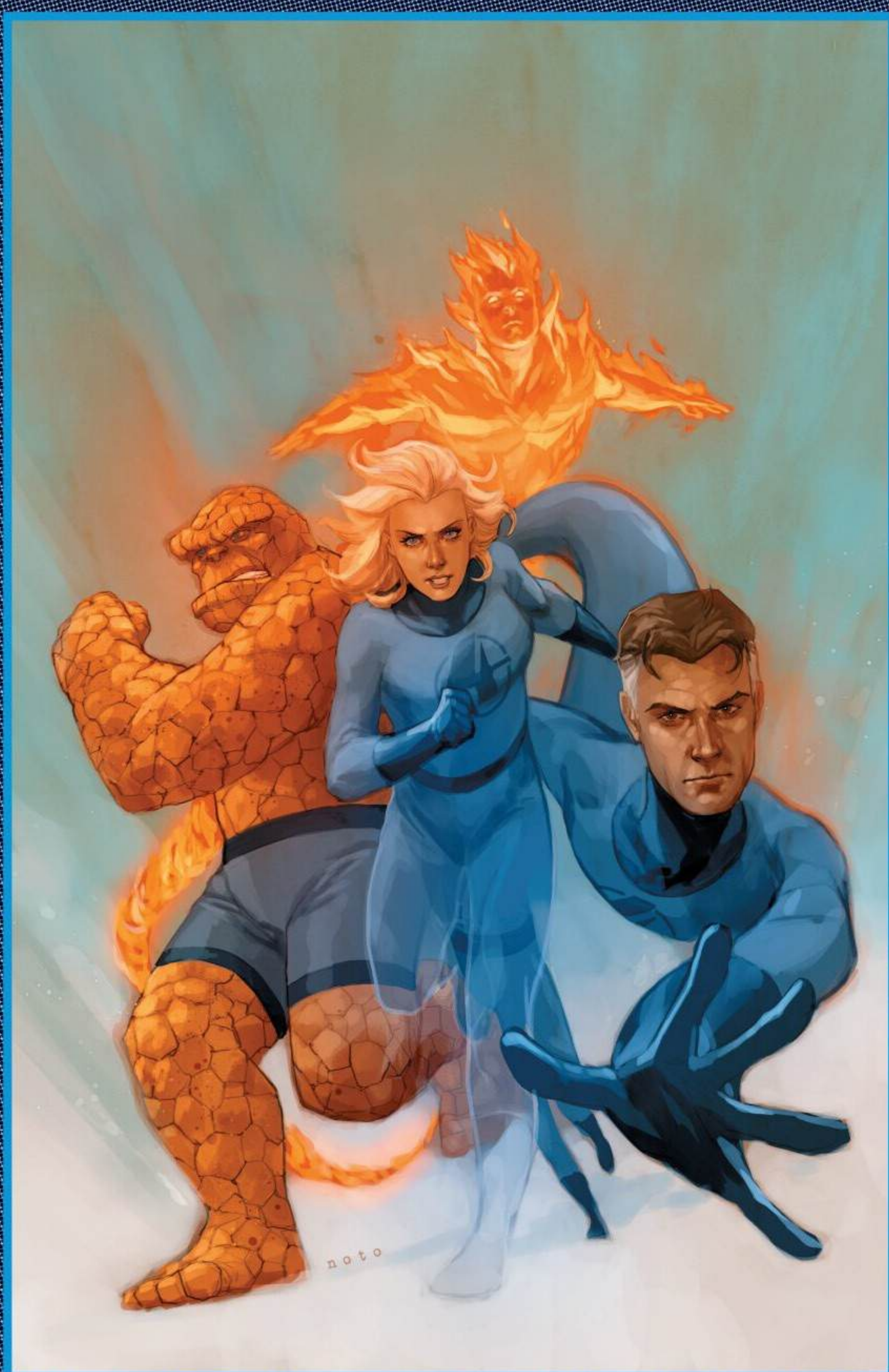
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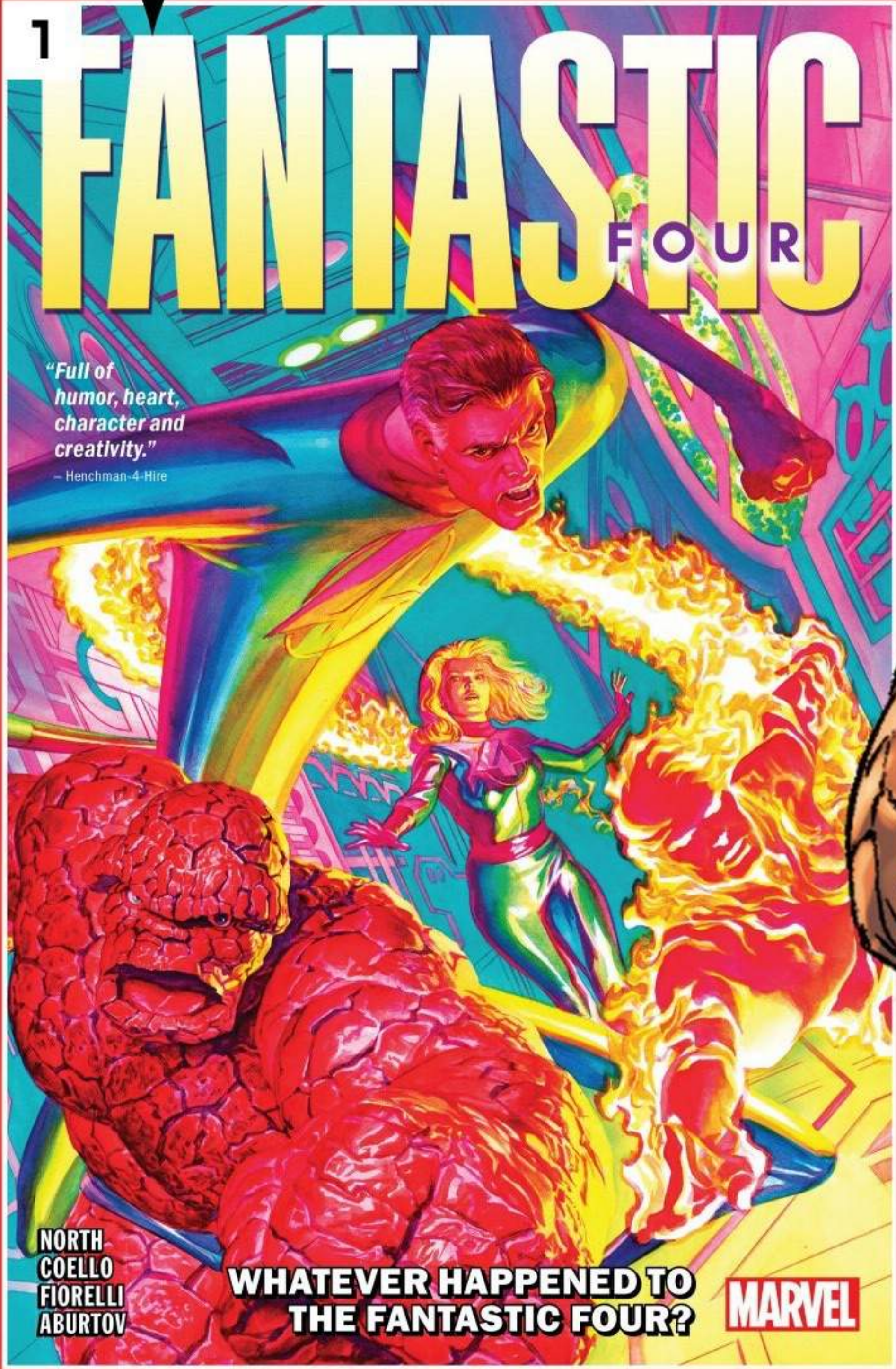
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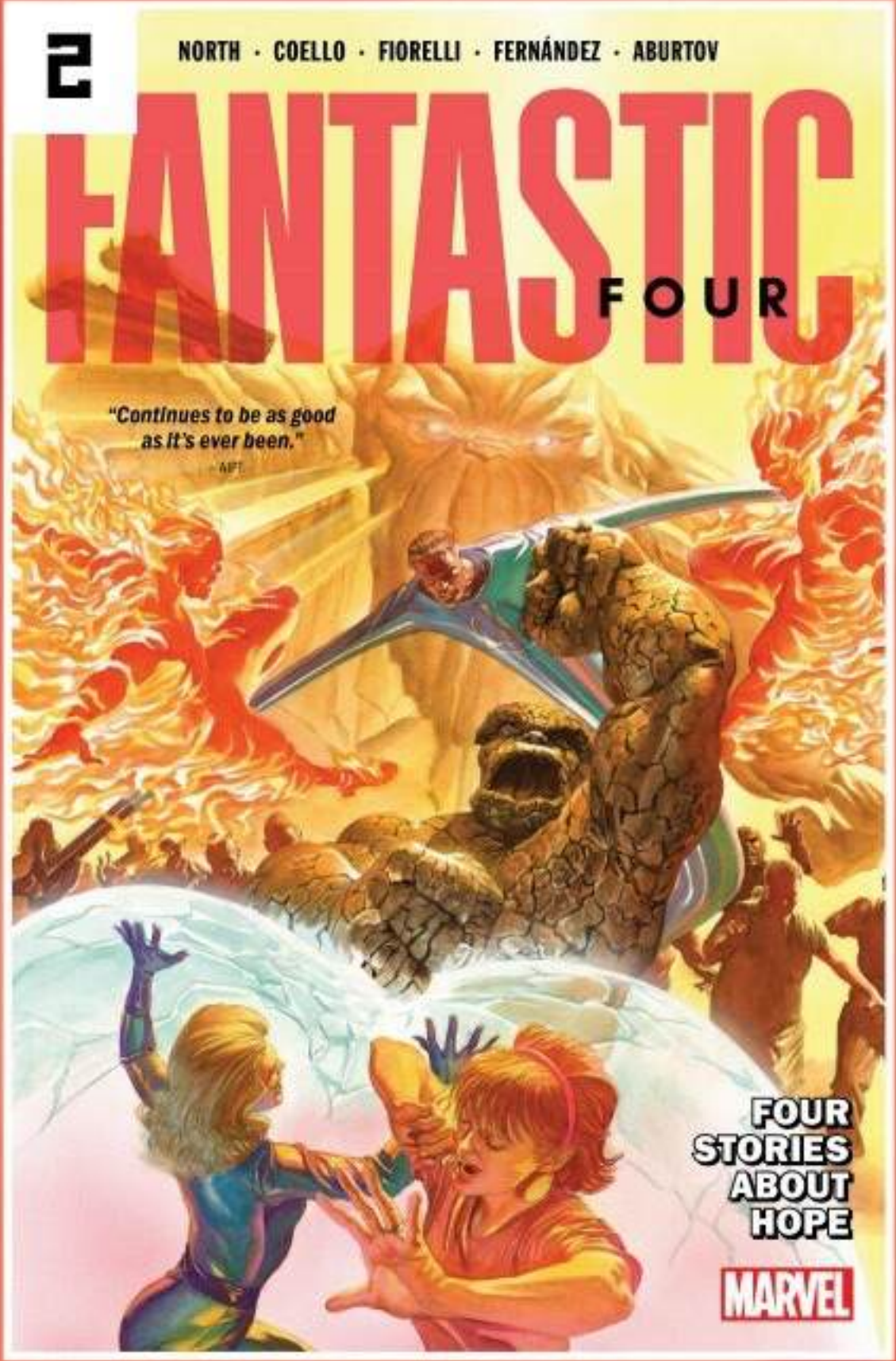


FANTASTIC FOUR

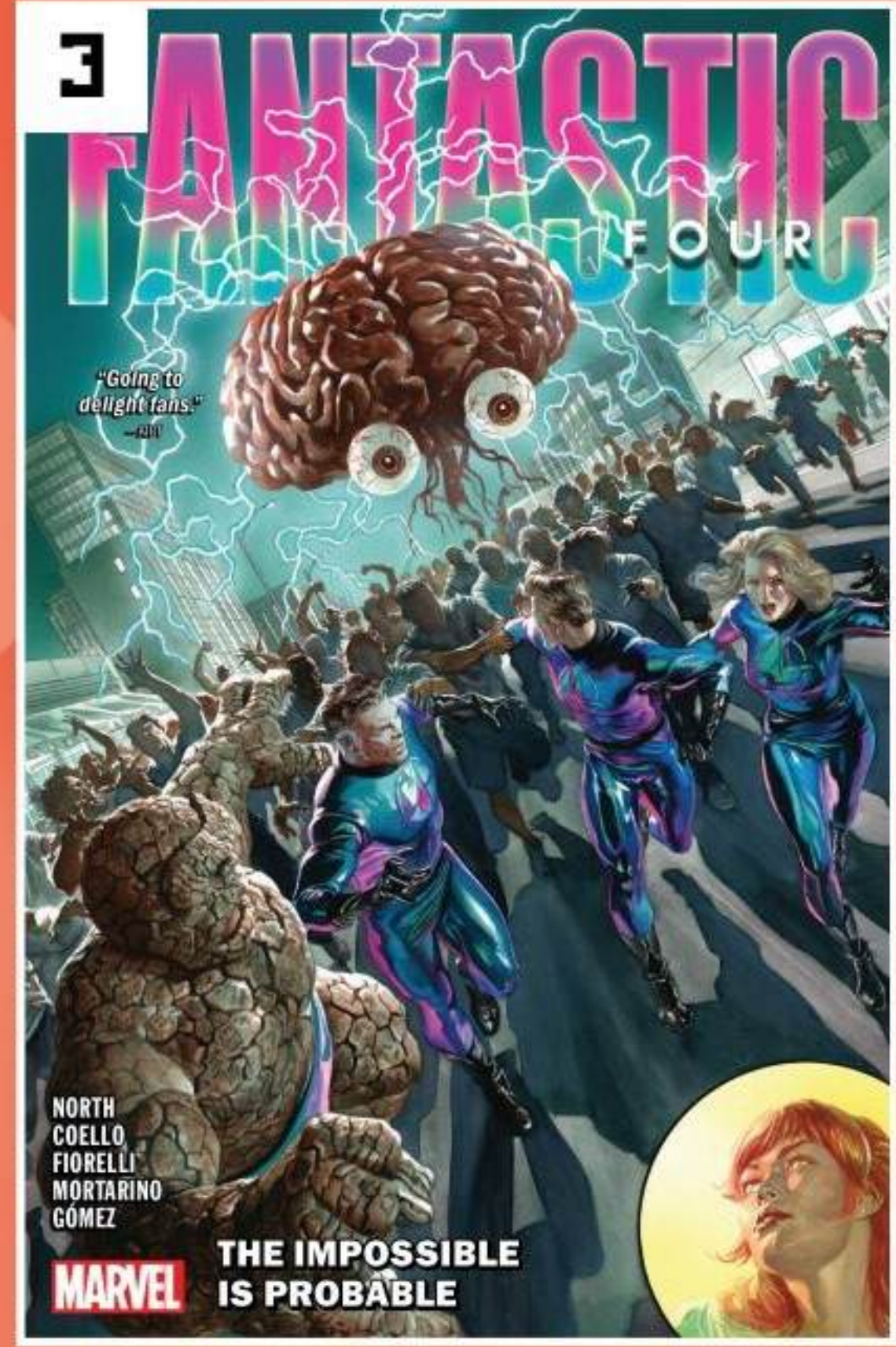


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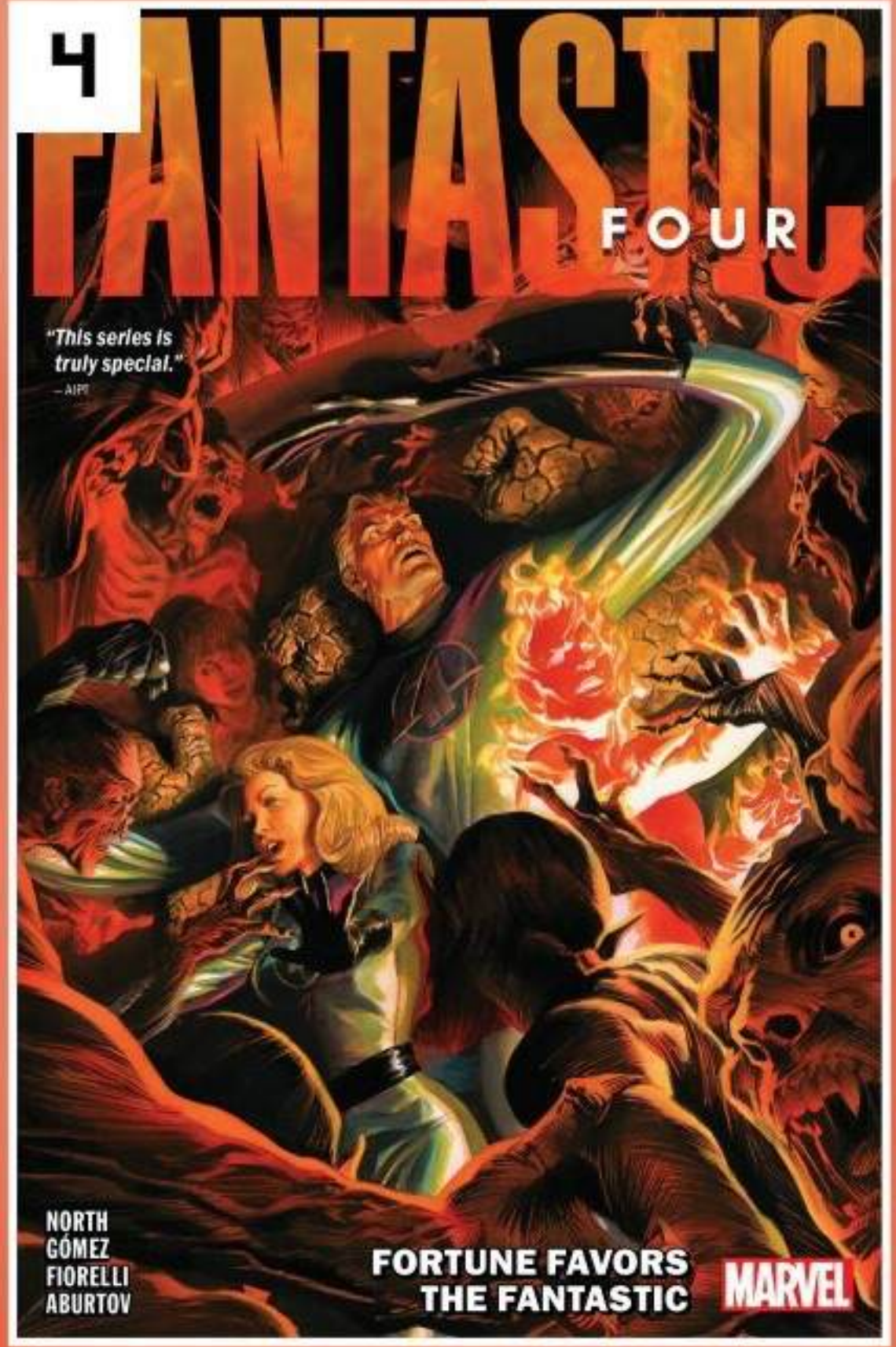
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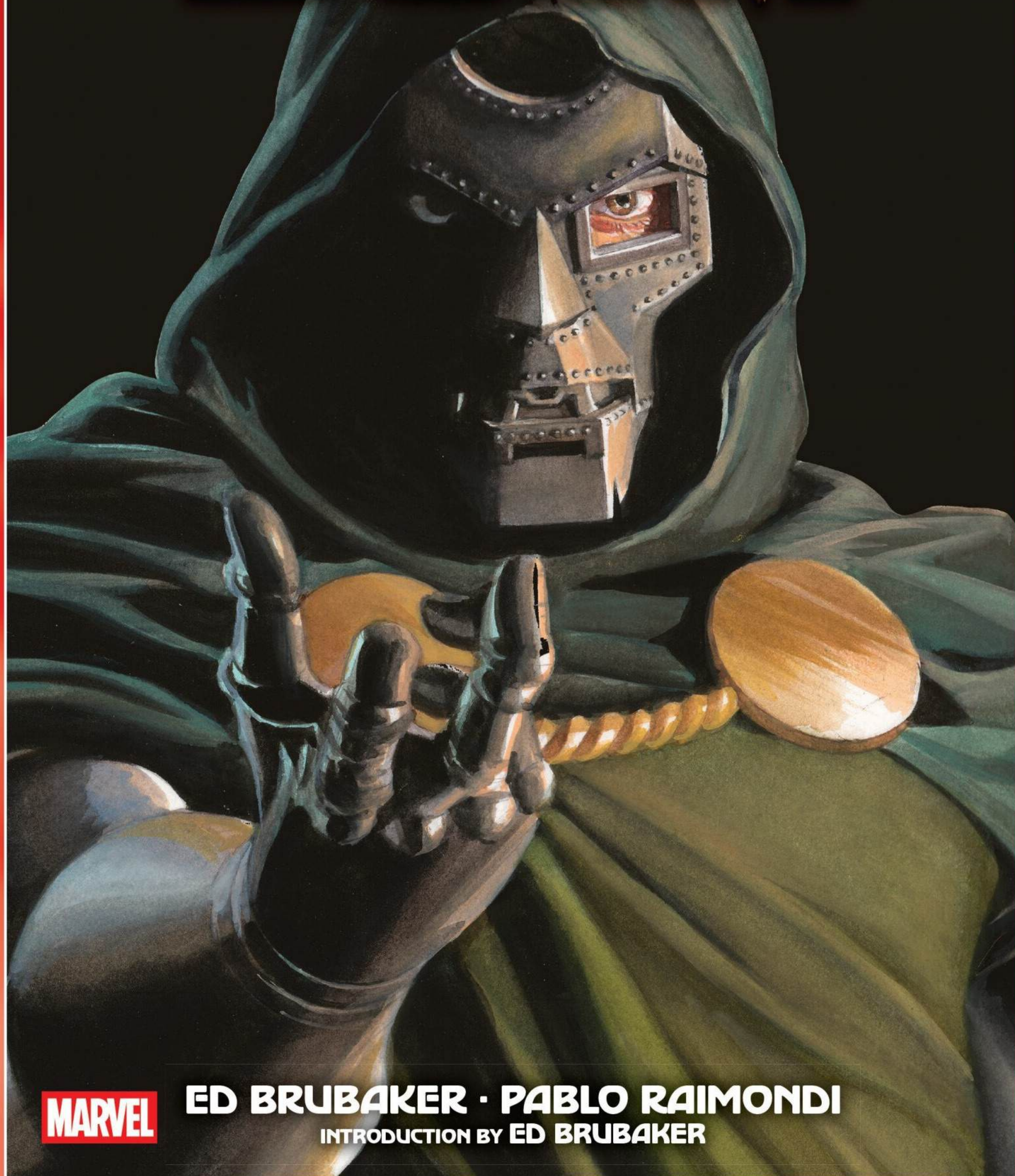
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MARVEL’S FIRST FAMILY!

WHEN EARTH IS INVADED BY SUBATOMIC PARTICLES from the other side of the universe, the Fantastic Four will need teamwork, cleverness and an old vehicle dug out of storage to save the world – plus some super-science! But there are some things in the universe even this super-family can’t stop! And when an excursion to Latveria magically sends the FF to an alien world, survival will be difficult on a planet so unlike our own, and it doesn’t get any easier when Johnny Storm hooks up with one of its residents! Then ghosts and demons run amok when Reed and Johnny open a hellmouth underneath the farm! And school hijinks ensue when you have a shape-shifter to get you out of trouble. Plus: Reed and Sue seek the help of the Black Knight to stop Earth’s new Sorcerer Supreme, Doctor Doom!



COLLECTING **FANTASTIC FOUR (2022) #23-28** — BY RYAN NORTH, CARLOS GÓMEZ,
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MARVEL